





"HE HAD FALLEN WITHOUT A CRY" (P. 53)

THE SPIDER'S EYE

WILLIAM LE QUEUX

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
BY H. M. HARRISON

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BY

WILLIAM LE QUEUX

WITH EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS

By W. H. MARGETSON

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THE SPIDER'S EYE.

CHAPTER I.

IS MAINLY ABOUT A WOMAN.

"THEN you are actually in love with him !
Come, Paolina, let us talk frankly."

"I have already spoken quite frankly."

"But, remember — Walter Guilford is
my friend !"

"And am I not also your friend ?"

"An old friend, yes—but——"

"But what ?"

"Shall I speak candidly ?" I asked,
looking straight into her eyes.

"Why, of course," was the reply of the
well-dressed, dark-haired young Italian
woman, speaking in her pretty broken
English, so soft and charming to the ear.

"Well, the fact is I cannot quite under-

stand why it is that I find you here to-day in Brighton, after the affair of the Piazza Vittorio. You are wanted for that. The police came to me after you had escaped," I said in a low voice.

"And you told them nothing, my dear George," she exclaimed with a slight smile.

"You are English, and an Englishman knows how to keep his mouth closed where a woman is concerned."

"They followed you to Rome, where you disappeared," I said. "Well—and where have you been since?"

"I went on to Naples and crossed to Alexandria. From there I went to Marseilles and over to New York."

"And then?"

"I had no money, so I first earned my living as a waitress in a restaurant," she said, pulling her veil tightly down beneath her chin.

I smiled. The idea of Paolina Demaria as a waitress amused me.

"I passed as French," she went on, "under a French name, until I had enough money to go across to Chicago. There I became an assistant in a milliner's shop. I am clever at hats," she added. "You

recollect that you often used to admire mine in the old days."

"Yes," I said, gazing reflectively into those great dark eyes. "In the old days—before that affair in Florence!"

"Ah!" she sighed, examining the handle of her sunshade. "It was unfortunate. But why refer to it? The dead cannot speak."

"And if he could?" I asked, in a meaning tone, regarding her very seriously.

"Then the truth would be known."

"The truth, Paolina, that would convict you of—well, what shall we term it?—of a passion that proved fatal."

"No," she answered, a fierce light in her eyes, while her gloved hand closed tightly. "A truth that would establish my innocence."

"Your innocence!" I exclaimed. "Then, if you deny your guilt, why did you fly?"

"Because I was in fear," she answered, in a broken voice. "I know what you must think of me, George—what all the world thinks of me. I am Paolina Demaria, once your friend, but now an adventuress. True, I have had adventures—more, perhaps, than

most women. Yet I can still face you—the man who once loved me—and declare that I am an honest woman."

"Then why allow the world to misjudge you?"

"Because it suited my purpose," was her hard response. "A man—a friend of yours—died, and I am declared to have been the author of the crime. Well," she laughed harshly, "I fear justice so much that I am here, in England, sitting with you, before all these people," and she waved her small gloved hand at the smartly dressed crowd promenading up and down before us.

The noon was warm and brilliant, with bright sunshine and blue summer sea. I had been seated alone that Sunday on the lawn at Brighton, idly watching the church parade and looking out for people I knew. It was mid-August, so the costumes were for the most part light and gay, and the brilliant scene attracting a good many world-weary idlers beside myself, most of the chairs within the iron railings were occupied. Of a sudden, just as I was inwardly admiring a smart, neat-waisted figure in white with a large black hat and white silk sunshade, the face was turned towards me,

and in an instant we exchanged smiles of mutual recognition.

"Paolina—you!" I had exclaimed, jumping up, compelled to take the hand she offered me, and then, when she had expressed surprise at our re-encounter, she had seated herself beside me, and, not without some hesitation, commenced to chat.

Her well-cut countenance had undergone but little change since four years ago, except that perhaps she had grown even more handsome. Her cheeks were delicately moulded, her mouth small, with the true *arc de cupidon*, her dark eyebrows well defined, her eyes large and fathomless, and her even teeth pearly white when she smiled at me. Ah! what a perfectly beautiful face! —a countenance that was striking everywhere, and caused even women to turn back and look at her as she passed. Her beauty was of that rare type in Italy, dark, without being swarthy. The sun of her own southern land had never kissed her cheeks, for her complexion was as fine and fair as an Englishwoman's, while her delicacy and grace in gait and carriage were noticeable even in that smartly dressed Sunday crowd from London.

THE SPIDER'S EYE.

No gown upon the lawn compared with hers for style and *chic*, a creation from the Rue de la Paix, no doubt, and as she seated herself at my side, the women around us turned to admire her and to whisper among themselves.

And she had earned her living as a waitress in a New York restaurant!

In the kaleidoscope of life one witnesses strange scenes, while the wheel of fortune too often turns to zero.

I, George Markham, was actually sitting there openly beside Paolina Demaria, the notorious woman for whom the Continental police had searched in vain for the past four years—the woman wanted upon a charge which, when made public would startle Europe. At first I could scarcely believe it to be true. And yet she was there beside me, her white sunshade held lightly over her shoulder, and her red lips parted in a sweet smile as she chatted on with that sibilant accent and quaintness of expression which I had long ago found so charming.

"Ah!" she exclaimed suddenly, recollecting the presence of people sitting near us. "Let us talk in Italian. These people

will not understand then. I have to be careful sometimes, you know!"

Careful! Was she exercising due care in walking there openly along that wide promenade when there was posted up in every police-station o r the Continent a substantial reward for information leading to her arrest? In England there are more foreign police spies than one supposes. Yet, strangely enough, her handsome countenance bore no trace of any undue anxiety. It almost seemed as though her apparent recklessness was begotten of the knowledge of her own innocence of the terrible charge against her.

Ah! what a charge! As we sat there talking frankly in Italian as old friends—nay, as lovers of long ago—a flood of recollections surged through my brain, sweet half-forgotten visions of days long since dead, hot, breathless days and clear moonlit nights beneath the unflecked skies of old-world Tuscany, that never-changing country of mountain and plain where dark eyes flash, where love is a fierce passion, and where the knife is so swift to avenge.

Who of those, while taking the sea air and sunshine on that summer's noon on

the Brunswick Lawn, and glancing at her wonderful face beneath the white parasol as they passed, could have even dreamed her strange story—the story of a woman whose beauty was, alas! fatal? Surely none in that mixed crowd had seen half so much of life as she had. She was an adventuress: a woman about whom much scandal had been whispered; a woman of unenviable notoriety, in Florence and in Rome. Yet her countenance was as innocent in its expression as a child's, and her smile always as sweet and fascinating to women as to men.

She was not more than twenty-five, still almost girlish in figure, and yet as I sat beside her, leaning upon my stick and gazing into those soft, wonderful eyes that I knew so well, visions arose before me of the quiet little mountain village high up above the winding Arno, of the great old white villa where my father lived in summer, and of the little villino with the green sun-shutters half way down the hill-side where the grey-haired old Professor Demaria, of Ferrara University, lived with his only child Paolina. The old Professor, a widower, decrepit, half blind, doted on his daughter, and was

greatly attached to my father. Paolina and I had been playmates from our earliest youth. Then had come the boy-and-girl attachment ripening into a fierce, all-consuming affection—days when we both so foolishly believed that our love would last always; nights when we wandered hand-in-hand and watched the fireflies. And then! Ah! let the past remain buried.

"How strange it is, Paolina!" I remarked almost mechanically. "How strange that we should meet here, in Brighton, to-day, I still a bachelor, and you——" I hesitated. What could I say?

"And I am what the world terms an adventuress!" she laughed, lightly but bitterly. "You may just as well say it. I shall not be offended, I assure you. They say that some men have ruined themselves on my account. Well?" and she shrugged her shoulders. "Let them say what they will. I alone know my own heart. Once, George, I loved you—loved you honestly and well."

"Let that pass," I sighed; "we need not recall it. Long ago we resolved that it should never be mentioned again between us."

"I know! I know!" she said sadly, her voice broken by emotion. "But if our love had continued I surely should have been a better woman. How strange, indeed, that for four years I have shifted and worked and wandered—often, I confess, with regretful thought of you—and now to-day chance brings us together face to face!"

And her eyes, those eyes so full of mystery, were filled with tears, and yet fixed upon me as though she were trying to read my innermost thoughts.

In those moments I forgot that she was Paolina Demaria, the superbly beautiful woman, notorious throughout half Europe.

I only thought of her as the half-forgotten love with whom I used to wander long ago through the olives and the vines, whose voice was as music to my ears, and the remembrance of whose hot, passionate kisses were even now, in maturer years, ever upon my lips.

Love! Was it possible that this woman whose description and whose deeds were recorded upon that bold poster issued by the Italian police in a dozen languages, had

ever actually loved me? And yet she was really possessed of true affection, for she had just made an open confession of love that held me utterly astonished. Hers was a strangely complex character—passionate in her love, bitter in her hatred, and yet so docile, so ineffably charming. The man she now loved was my friend. Did she, I wondered, intend that he should be her next victim?

"Yes," she exclaimed, after a brief pause; "you are quite right, George. The past is past. Pray forgive me for indulging in foolish sentiment, but recollect I am, after all, a woman. I only beg of you, however, not to prejudge me. I know too well the charge they make against me. I am a person to be shunned and to be condemned, a woman whose very name is synonymous of evil. Well," she laughed defiantly, "let the world say what it will. I can gauge my own conscience, and if that were guilty I dare not have taken your hand in friendship to-day, the hand of the man who was my—my first love."

She spoke with earnest conviction, and with a frankness that was convincing. There was no attempt at coquetry or fascination.

On the contrary, she was, before me, humbled and abject; different, indeed, from the brilliant woman whom all Rome knew by sight and half Florence adored. Alas! how fickle is fame!

Once the people of Florence had waved their hands and shouted "vivas" as she flashed past in her splendid victoria; but now the malcontent section of the Press was ever demanding the reason why she had not been arrested and condemned, and hinting that there were reasons of State why she had been allowed to go scot free. The Ministry in Rome, they declared, feared that certain revelations might be made.

We sat in silence for some time, gazing reflectively at the laughing crowd of promenaders. Two men I knew passed and raised their hats, surprised to see me with my brilliant companion.

"George," she said in a soft voice, "it is best, perhaps, that we should not be seen together. Your friends will inquire who I am. But I still have much to tell you, and your presence at my side brings back all my most cherished recollections of the past—of those old days up at San Martino. I am at the Métropole. Will you not dine

with me this evening, and then we can talk,
and you shall decide ? ”

“ Decide what ? ”

“ My future,” she answered in a voice
scarcely above a whisper.

CHAPTER II.

CONCERNS TWO HEARTS.

As we sat together at the dinner-table in her private sitting-room at the Métropole, where the long window looked out upon the King's Road and the sea, I gazed across at her, and thought she had never looked more handsome.

Her dead black gown, with its touch of scarlet in the corsage, rendered by contrast her well-formed neck and arms white as alabaster, while in her dark hair, that had evidently been dressed by a clever maid, was a plain bow of black silk. She only wore one ornament, a thin chain and small gold locket that, in surprise, I recognised—a cheap trinket that I had given her long back in her girlhood days.

She saw my eyes fixed upon it, and smiling, opened it and showed me the faded photograph of a thin-faced youth—the one I had placed there with my own hands.

"You recollect?" she asked, for we had finished our meal; the waiter had served coffee, and we were now alone.

"I do," was my response.

"When I left Italy I was compelled to sell all my jewels. But this alone I kept in remembrance of our love," she said, in her soft, well-modulated voice.

It crossed my mind whether, after all, I had been wise to accept her invitation. I was, I knew, treading dangerous ground. Indeed, the old love might be reawakened within me, and if so, then what folly might I not commit?

I recollected her as she had been when I had given her that little trinket, a slim girl in white, with her dark hair bound behind by a black ribbon, a trifle hoydenish, perhaps, but charming always. Ten years with the good nuns of the Beata Giovanna had instilled into her strong religious convictions, and she was a regular attendant at mass at San Martino on every *festà* and every Sunday. On leaving the Convent she had implored the old Professor to be allowed to take the veil, and it was, I knew, only her father's helplessness that had prevented her entering one of the religious orders. For a

year she had pined for the peace of the cloister and the perpetual adoration of God. Then, when our constant companionship ripened into attachment, a new life suddenly opened out to her, mundane things had gradually occupied her mind, and from a candidate for the sisterhood she had become what she was that day, a brilliant woman of the world.

She closed the common little locket with a snap, then raising it to her lips, kissed it reverently, her eyes fixed gravely upon me the while.

"No," I protested. "Why not throw it away, Paolina? We are still friends; but no longer lovers."

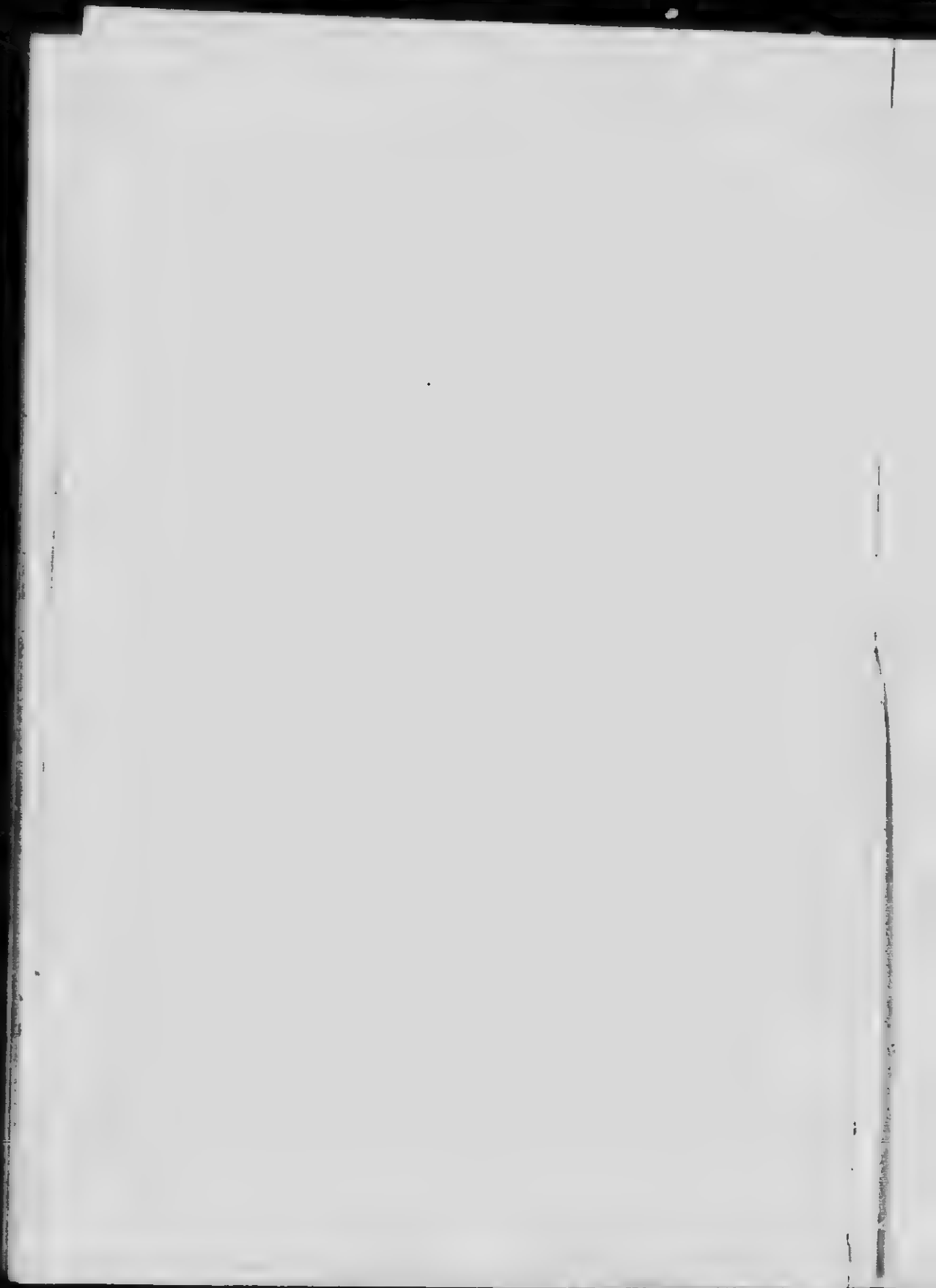
"True!" she sighed, a bitter smile upon her lips. "You have no further affection for me, and can I be surprised when I recollect who and what I am. Nevertheless, treat me how you will, George, you may surely allow my thoughts to wander back, and my lips to press this little pledge of an affection which we both believed was to last always."

"Put it away. Never wear it again," I said hoarsely.

"I have worn it constantly, and shall



"RAISING IT TO HER LIPS, KISSED IT REVERENTLY"



continue to do so," she declared. "It is a souvenir of a long-cherished memory."

I had risen from the table and was standing by the window, gazing out upon the misty horizon. The myriad coloured lights now outlined the pier, and from across the water came the distant strains of a band playing a selection from the latest musical comedy.

"And yet you tell me you are in love with Walter Guilford?" I remarked, turning to her suddenly.

With a quick *frou-frou* of her skirts she was at my side, instantly grasping my hand.

"Listen, George!" she cried, in a low, intense voice. "I will tell you the truth because I know that for the old love you bore me long ago you will not denounce me. You were silent when Pietro Zoli, the chief of the detective service, questioned you, and you will be silent now."

"Well?" I asked. "And what have you to tell me?"

I saw that in her face was an expression of deep earnestness, and the hand that held my own trembled with emotion.

"When I told you to-day the name of the man who loves me, I never dreamed

that you knew him—that he was your friend. He has offered me marriage, and I have accepted.”

“You—” I gasped, astounded. “You intend to marry Walter Guilford?”

She nodded in the affirmative, her chin sunk upon her breast.

“You don’t really mean this, Paolina!” I exclaimed. “There may be mutual affection between you, but surely you dare not accept him as husband? The past may rise up against you.”

“I have already done so. We are to be married next January. You do not congratulate me?”

“I will reserve my congratulations,” I said coldly. “Tell me how you became acquainted with my friend?”

“It was in Chicago. He was travelling in America with his sister, and he came with her to our store to order hats. One day he slipped his card into my hand and whispered an appointment, which I kept. He remained six months in Chicago after that, and before he left we became formally engaged. He knew that I was only a poor milliner’s assistant, and to my surprise I one day received formal notice from the Bank

of Philadelphia that a considerable sum had been placed there to my credit, while two days later I received a letter from him in London urging me to come to England, in order that we might sometimes be able to see each other. He said he did not like the idea of his affianced wife serving in a milliner's shop, and would prefer me to be in England, in the care of some respectable family until our marriage."

"So you came, eh?"

"Yes. On landing at Liverpool, Walter met me and took me to some friends of his named Wentworth, a man, his wife, and daughter, who live at Radstone, near the town of Brackley, in Northamptonshire. Mr. Wentworth, who has a pleasant old-fashioned house with pretty grounds, was, I found, what you call in English, squire of the place, and with his wife and daughter, May, I quickly settled down to a quiet rural life, Walter frequently being the guest of his friend."

"And where is he now?"

"In Scotland, shooting. The Wentworths are motoring down to Exeter and have left me here with Mason, the maid, until their return. I am rather nervous of a motor,"

she added. "I had a rather bad accident the week I arrived at Radstone."

"Then Walter Guilford really intends to make you his wife?" I said slowly and reflectively.

"Certainly," she responded. "I know that in the circumstances it must strike you as strange, yet you surely will not deny me happiness with a man whom I can love?" she asked in deep earnestness.

"But do you know who he really is?" I asked, fixing my eyes upon her.

"He has told me very little about himself," was her reply. "I suppose he must have means, or he would not have paid a thousand English pounds into the bank to cover my present expenses, and so render me independent. In any case, he knows he is marrying a woman without a soldo."

"Yes. But he does not know who the woman really is," I said in a low voice.

"Ah! you will never tell him! You will never divulge my secret, George!" she implored, clinging to me. "Promise me that—do promise me!"

"Well," I said, disregarding her appeal, "if you do not know who he is I will tell you. Walter Guilford, besides being a wealthy

man, is nephew and heir of the Earl of Towcester, a man whose health is so bad that the doctors have despaired of his life half a dozen times in as many months. Therefore, Paolina, if you marry my friend, you will eventually become Countess of Towcester, a peeress of England."

She stood staring at me open-mouthed.

"Walter—heir to an earldom!" she gasped, as a change came over her beautiful countenance and the light seemed to die out of it. "Ah! I see—I see it all! Yes. You are quite right, George," she added, in a voice choked by emotion. "I thought he was only a man of moderate means who loved me, and with whom I could be really happy. But I see that, with the stigma upon me, I should not enter his noble family. The world misjudges me—you, George, misjudge me, and I must therefore continue to suffer!" And she suddenly burst into a torrent of tears.

"No, no," I said, placing my hand tenderly upon her shoulder. "You don't quite understand my argument. I merely point out that until this imminent peril of arrest has passed, it would be unfair of you to marry any man."

"But I am not seeking wealth or position," she declared through her tears. "I am lonely and unhappy, and need the protection of a husband, of a man whom I can honestly love."

"I quite admit that, Paolina, but remember that the world's judgment upon your conduct has been formed solely upon your own actions. You told me to-day that you had an end in view in being classed as an adventuress."

"I had," she said. "Heaven will judge that I am not so black as they have painted me. I swear to you, whose love I have ever held sacred, that I am innocent of that affair in Florence. They would, I know, make me their scapegoat, yet they fear to do so. Otherwise I should have been arrested and extradited to Italy long ago. The great Zoli, the detective from Florence, came to Chicago and found me. I spoke to him, and I defied him so openly that he returned again to Italy to consult his superiors. The fact that I still retain my freedom speaks for itself."

"In any case, you must not marry Walter before the mystery of the Piazza is cleared up," I said, quite firmly. "I will

keep your secret, Paolina, but I will not allow you to imperil my friend's honour."

"Then you suspect that I am guilty, eh?" she asked quickly, her dark eyes flashing.

"On the contrary, I believe you, for I have never once known you to tell *me* a lie."

"Then—then perhaps you still love me a little, George, after all, eh?" she asked in her soft, winning Italian way. "And you are, oh! ever so little—jealous?"

I did not reply. Perhaps there was just a *soupçon* of truth in what she said, but at that moment I was in no mood to admit it. This startling confession of hers that she was to marry Walter Guilford, who was, perhaps, the most eligible bachelor in all London, held me amazed. Walter was, I knew, very headstrong where a pretty woman was concerned, yet I could never have imagined that he would propose to a mere milliner's assistant in a Chicago store. A word from me would be sufficient to cause him instantly to withdraw, for he was a man of somewhat old-fashioned ideas regarding family honour and all that kind of thing; ideas which in these degenerate days,

when brewers buy peerages, seem to be dead and buried.

Paolina recognised too that her future lay entirely in my power, and grasping both my hands implored me through her tears to remain silent and allow her romantic love affair to proceed.

"I owe all to you," she declared. "Had you not had pity upon me, a woman, you could easily have told Zoli that you had received word from me of my address in Naples, where I was in hiding after that fateful night. But you refused him information, because you are still as loyal to me, George—just as you were in the old days."

"No," I said. "But when the mystery has cleared up, I will renew my loyalty, as you well know," I added, looking down into her blank, melancholy countenance. "I have never loved any other woman besides your own self, Paolina. And I think I should still love you were it not for those scandals which I have heard on every side."

"Then you really believe them?" she cried, drawing herself up with that stiff hauteur which she sometimes assumed.

"How can I shut my ears to the voice of gossip?"

"Of course not; no man can. If you loved me still, you would not heed those calumnies. But no," she sighed, "your love for me is, alas! dead. Now it only remains a fast-fading memory."

"An unfading one, Paolina," I declared, pressing her small hand, "otherwise I should not be here with you to-night."

"Ah!" she exclaimed. "Those words, George, give me renewed hope and courage. Some day I will prove to you that I am still worthy of your sympathy and kindly thought, and that the world has formed very wrong conclusions regarding my actions."

"But you must not marry Walter until you have given me this proof," I said. "I forbid it."

"Ah, no! You will not be so cruel to me as that! You are actuated towards Walter from motives of friendliness, yet remember that you and I have known each other as children, and that I have now an opportunity of love and happiness. No, George," she cried, bursting into tears and throwing herself upon her knees before me and covering her face with her hands. "No, you will not deny me this second chance of life! I swear here that I love Walter, that

I will make him a good wife, that he shall never regret his marriage, and you shall never regret your silence."

She had taken my hand with a sudden movement, and she raised it to her lips. But I withdrew it firmly, saying in a hard voice :

"And those grave scandals? Do you deny to me that on the day prior to his death, poor Fred Ingram paid into your account at the Banca Commerciale sixty thousand lire?"

"Who told you that?" she gasped, her face deathly pale. "How did you know?"

"From the police. The books of the bank cannot lie," I said, gravely.

"Yes," she admitted, "it is the truth." And with her head bowed as she remained still upon her knees before me, she added : "The money was paid to me. I borrowed it from him, and gave him ample security, but his death was a mystery. I knew nothing—until—until I heard that he had been found dead—nothing. I swear before Heaven!"

"And you declare to me that you are a woman fitted to be the wife of my friend—a friend who, when we were fishing in

Norway, once risked his life to save mine?" I laughed bitterly, for her admission confirmed all those grave suspicions that I had held. "No, Paolina, much as I regret, I can never allow you to marry Walter Guilford—this folly must end for your own sake, as well as for his."

"That is your decision!" she gasped, her face blanched as she slowly struggled to her feet. "You forbid me to marry him! In other words, you threaten to expose me if I attempt. I thought, George, that at least you, of all men, sympathised with me. But I was wrong—wrong!" she repeated bitterly, in a low, hoarse voice. "Because I have frankly and fearlessly answered your question, instead of telling a lie to save myself in your esteem, you deny me peace, and love, and happiness. You will wreck my future, and send me again into the world, penniless, with the stigma of crime upon me—you whose love-token I wear always—you whose love is my one cherished memory of youth. Ah! George, the world has been too cruel to me—and you, my judge, have condemned me without pity, justice, or mercy!"

"I am not your judge, Paolina," I said,

endeavouring to remain calm. "One alone may be that. I merely tell you that you may not marry Walter Guilford until the true facts concerning poor Ingram's death in Florence are revealed."

"Ah, yes!" she cried, wildly. "Your suspicions are but natural, I know. You—even you, George—still believe that I am guilty—you still suspect that I am what the world has adjudged me to be—an adventuress! But," she said, raising her tear-stained face to mine pleadingly, "look at me! Look into my eyes and say whether I am deceiving you. I do not ask your love—I ask only your mercy."

I saw how fiercely in earnest she was, and realised that all her future depended upon my permission for her to love my friend. My conscience at that moment was torn by conflicting thoughts. Was she really innocent, or was she playing me false, as they said she had played others?

"Well," I said at length, relenting somewhat, "I will not entirely deny you your happiness, Paolina. I will only say that you must not marry without my consent."

"Then you will allow me to love him and remain engaged to him?" she cried, in

grateful eagerness. "Until I can prove to you that I am not what you think me, you will keep silence, will you not?"

"Yes. No word regarding your past shall pass my lips, as long as you keep faith with me. If we meet in his presence, we will meet as strangers."

"Ah! Thank you for those words, George! You are still generous to me, as you always were. My future, my very life, depends upon your silence. Here, in England, no one knows me; and if I remain here, I can, perhaps, bury the past. I promise that your friend shall never regret his love for me—never." She burst into tears, and seizing my hand again, raised it once more to her ready lips.

But I stood gazing at her in silence, wondering whether she were innocent or guilty of that terrible charge.

CHAPTER III.

SOME MEMORIES AND A MORAL.

THREE days later an urgent telegram from Italy recalled me to Florence on business connected with my property, and within a week I was back at the great old villa high up above the Arno, the Medicean stronghold with its barred windows, huge faded salons, wonderful frescoes and marble floors that had been the old-world home of my youth.

The dark, time-stained pictures of the cinquecento with those life-sized figures I knew so well looked down upon me as I passed through the ancient echoing halls, old Giovannino and his wife, the caretakers, chattering at my side, and Rover, my English collie, bounding at me in welcome.

There had been trouble with the contadini, or peasantry, as there is so often, and Giovannino was giving me his version of it before I interviewed the new manager. The brown-faced, wrinkled old fellow had been

a trusted servant of my father's, and being born upon the land—his family having held vineyards there for generations—he regarded himself almost as part proprietor with myself. When I was absent, Giovannino, short of stature and wearing blue trousers, and a scarf in lieu of a belt, was indeed the *padrone*.

I strolled into my old fashioned "studio," as they called my study, and there listened to the versions of the new *fattore*, of the peasant accused, and of the various witnesses regarding an act of incendiarism, three stacks of corn belonging to another peasant having been wilfully on fire.

Then, when I had held the inquiry and deferred judgment, I went forth alone upon the broad terrace, delightful in the cool of sunset. Beneath the old rose arbour I sat down, and lighting a pipe, gazed away across the deep valley to where the Apennines loomed forth purple away beyond old Pistoja. Below me spread the whole glorious panorama with the Arno shining like liquid gold in the calm August undown, while far away rose the towers and domes of Florence, the unchanging Lily City, and beyond, Fiesole and the giant mountains where the Vallombrosa forests lay hidden in the mists.

Yes, the scene was one of the fairest in all fair Italy, a scene that I had often looked on in the days of my boyhood, without, however, admiring it. Years had gone since I had lived there for more than a few days at a time. The huge old place was dull now that my father was dead. Nowadays, whenever in Italy I preferred Rome, Florence, or Leghorn to the country, and only visited the villa for a few days each year, in order to go through the accounts with the *fattore*. Those great frescoed salons with the old gilt furniture and faded tapestries had often been the scene of gaiety and merriment, when my parents kept company and gave receptions; but now, alas! they were silent, dark, and gloomy, closed against the burning suns of summer.

Below, half way down the vine-clad hillside, showed the brown roof of a small villa with a pretty garden, now, alas! closed and neglected. Sight of it recalled me to memories of the past. It was the house in which the old Professor had lived and died, the house of that dainty little love of my youth, my Paolina.

Ah! how well I recollected every stone and every tree! How often had I stood at

that spot leaning over the old stone balustrade signalling to her at the window, and how often had we wandered together hand in hand through those olives and vines where the fireflies shone at evening! We men often retain a sweet and tender memory of a woman who is worthless, and I suppose I was no exception. I rose and passed along the front of the house, where the windows, heavily barred, spoke mutely of the troublous times of four centuries ago, and skirting the side along the ancient cloister entered our private chapel and stood bare-headed before the dusty altar.

Yes, it was just the same; nothing had changed. Before that splendid old Madonna of Gerino's, my Paolina had so often knelt and crossed herself as the good nuns had taught her to do. Indeed, it had been her habit to come there every day alone, instead of going down to San Martino, where there were always idlers to watch her at her devotions. The old ivory crucifix was still in its place, and the lace altar-front hung limp and yellow. In the brass vases were still the paper flowers which she had made, faded and dirty. Now that Mass was never said there, Giovannino and the peasants

went down to San Martino, consequently the chapel was only cleaned once a year when the procession came up headed by the old *proposto* at the Feast of the Rosary.

I remembered seeing my love kneeling there at the altar steps, her hands clasped, her lips moving, and then I recollected her down in Florence, the gay winter city, years after, and again upon the Lawns at far-off Brighton.

With a sigh I turned from the neglected old place, and passed through the sacristy, out again into the golden sunset. Giovannino, cap in hand, met me to tell me of the fine prospects of the vintage and of the splendid grape crop on the farms over at San Romolo.

"Ah!" exclaimed the honest old fellow with the brown furrowed face. "How we all wish the Signor Commendatore would come back again to us, instead of remaining always in your cold England. The days and years go on, and the Villa is always closed—the Signorino is always *in estero*."

"Some day, I hope I shall come back to live among you," I said, smiling at the old fellow's simple wish.

"When the Signorino is married, perhaps?" he hazarded.

"Married? Oh, I shall never marry. Do you think I shall?"

"Well, padrone, you might have married the Signorina down yonder," he said frankly, jerking his finger over his shoulder. "We all thought you would, until the Signore sent you away to England, and I suppose—well, I suppose you both forgot each other."

"Yes," I snapped quickly. "But let us talk of something else—the olive oil, for instance. Was the price good last season?"

"Very fair, signore. We sold eighty barrels to the agents of the Inglese. They were sent to Livorno for shipment as usual. The fly troubles us a great deal, but we manage to overcome it with plenty of sulphate of copper."

And then, after other inquiries, I dismissed the garrulous old fellow, sending him on a message to old Sandrina, his wife—who had tied a new kerchief round her head in honour of the home-coming of the padrone—while I wandered back along the terrace and through the enormous rooms in which Lorenzo the Magnificent once held his

summer court, and where the fair-haired Lucretia Borgia and her father Alexander had conspired together against the city of Florence. If those high old walls could speak, what tales of love and hatred they could tell! what gorgeous scenes they had witnessed! what scenes of ruin and disaster!

I thought of Paolina as I strolled on, recollecting those days a dozen years ago when she had led her half-blind father up daily, and when my old governor and the Professor would sit together discussing the politics of newly united Italy. Each of those huge old apartments was intimately associated with her and our passionate affection. In the old ball-room as I stood gazing at the faded decorations, I remembered how she had danced with wild *abandon* while I had strummed on the piano, and how shocked the old Professor had been; and in the blue boudoir in the tower, where the silk upholstery was now so moth-eaten and dusty, I recollected how my dear mother had taught her the first rudiments of the English she now spoke so prettily.

I ascended to my own room, and there upon my dressing-table was the little pin-cushion in the shape of a heart which she

had embroidered for me, dusty, faded, and forgotten. Upon the wall, too, was a framed photograph of her as I had known her then, but yellow and spotted.

Perhaps mine was a foolish sentimentality. But I was alone, with none to witness my action. I took the picture down, kissed it, and replaced it upon its nail; it was a sweet debauch of melancholy—a calm, silent evening that dwelt long afterwards in my memory.

Sometimes, when I reflected upon her attitude on that evening at Brighton, I felt inclined to believe her declaration of innocence. And yet had she not condemned herself by that admission of having received a sum of money from the young Englishman, Fred Ingram, whose end had been so mysterious?

Perhaps I was, after all, a fool to allow myself to be stirred by those recollections of days so long dead. But she had been my only love. On being sent to England and shut up in dingy, shabby chambers in Fig Tree Court to read for the Bar, how I pined for sight of her, for the sound of her sweet voice, for the touch of her soft hand upon my own! The dismal Temple, with the strip

of yellow sky above and the wet courtyard below, was indeed dull and dispiriting after the fresh mountain air and bright sunlight of my burning, beloved Tuscany. Yet I was English, and, according to my father's views, already too Italian. For that reason I was sent to London, where, after a time, I learned to forget the sweet idyll of my youth. After two years of study, however, I revolted, for on coming of age I found myself possessed of a small inheritance left me by my mother. Therefore, with my father's consent, I set out to travel and see the world. I became a lonely wanderer over the face of Europe, and after several years gradually acquired a restless, cosmopolitan disposition which unfitted me more than ever for the humdrum life of legal London.

Time went on. My father died suddenly of a bad touch of the deadly malaria contracted while snipe-shooting down in the Maremma, and I found myself possessor of the fine estate of Santa Lucia, together with an ample fortune. Having many friends in Florence I furnished a cosy little flat on the upper part of the Lung Arno, close to the Cascine, that pretty park of the Florentines, and lived there in winter in preference to a

lonely life at the great old Villa eight miles away on the mountain-side. In summer I travelled to Aix, to London, to Scotland, to Norway—anywhere, indeed, where fancy took me, usually returning to Florence for the gaieties of Carnival.

No one could accuse me of being much of a ladies' man. In later years I had become something of a student, perhaps even a misanthrope. For certain services that I had been able to render the Italian State, his Majesty the King had, with his own hand, graciously bestowed upon me the highest decoration he could give, and as a Commendatore of the Crown of Italy I was at last in a fair way to settling down to a life of snug and comfortable respectability.

I had even grown weary of continual wandering, of the glare and glitter of big hotels, and of the eternal *table d'hôte*, with their motley crowds of bare-necked women, mostly scraggy. I longed for the peace of the country, yet I knew too well that in a week I should tire of it and go off wandering again.

In England I had tried it. From my father I inherited a little old-fashioned cottage near Battle, in Sussex, to which my

parents sometimes escaped from the summer heat of Italy, and more than once I spent a few months there. But so used was I to life and change that I became melancholy, and quickly fled to gayer scenes.

As the hot night closed in and the deep-toned bell of the old Franciscan convent across the valley rang out its solemn note, I thought it all over.

Then, I was a born wanderer, like my father and grandfather had been before me. I should never settle down for longer than a month or two. The longest period I had ever spent in one place was those two never-ending years in Fig Tree Court, and I even now shuddered when I recollected those dark, dismal days of winter when I pored over those musty volumes in the gas-light, even at mid-day.

Some village youths down in the valley were playing their mandolines in chorus as they walked, singing the old serenade, the same that has been sung for ages in the Tuscan Apennines :

"Nel silenzio della notte
Io ti sogno in bianco velo,
Come un angelo del cielo
Ti presenti innanzi a me.

"Vieni, o diletta,
Che giunta e l'ora,
Vieni, o diletta,
A passeggiar."

And, as I listened to those words out of the darkness, I remembered that it was the same old song I used to sing to Paolina in those happy, buoyant days when we loved each other and were innocent of the world, its weariness, or its wickedness—those sweet, peaceful days before we had gone down yonder into the valley where lay the gay Winter City—the valley of the shadow.

With a sigh, I rose and re-entered the house in order to shut those words out of my ears.

What did all these reflections mean?

Was I a fool? Did I still really love this woman who had so long been but a shadowy memory to me—this woman who was now an adventuress?

CHAPTER IV.

TELLS A TRUTH.

ALL next day I was occupied in going over the vineyards at San Romolo, seven miles away across the mountains, and the Fesa valley where the olives grow in such luxuriance.

At sundown, on return to my dinner, a man met me in the big hall and grasped my hand heartily, a man whom I had specially invited up from Florence to dine with me.

He was of middle age, fair-haired, with a short fair beard, blue kindly eyes, tall of stature, and of military bearing, but instead of being in evening clothes he wore a drab tweed suit with a Norfolk jacket, and looked a typical German tourist, the same as thousands who swarm in the Italian cities at all hours and all seasons.

"Ah! Signor Commendatore!" he cried.
"It was indeed a surprise to get your note!

We did not expect you back for months yet."

"I am only here on a brief visit, my dear friend," I explained, as we strolled out upon the terrace, awaiting old Sandrina's announcement that dinner was served. He apologised for not having dressed, hinting at the reason with a grim smile, and telling me that on the morrow he expected to set out on a visit to St. Petersburg.

He was a man of rapid movement and quick decision, a man whom few knew intimately as I did. His very name was synonymous for mystery, for instead of being the inoffensive German tourist with his wallet and his red-bound Baedeker, as he usually appeared, he was none other than Pietro Zoli, the great Italian detective, chief of the mobile squadron, chief of the secret service for the personal protection of his Majesty the King, and director of the detective service of the whole of Italy.

The exploits of that calm, quiet-mannered man, the most renowned detective in Europe, whose boast it was that he never carried any other weapon than his sword-cane, would, if written, make the most exciting volume ever penned. His ingenuity in dis-

covering crime and in elucidating mysteries was little short of miraculous; his personal disguises were innumerable, his rapidity of movement amazing, and his reputation as an astute and ingenious tracker of assassins such that his very name was sufficient to strike terror into the heart of the most hardened criminal. An excellent linguist, speaking French, German, and English perfectly, a past master in the ways of secret societies, and utterly fearless, he led a charmed life amid the thousand-and-one dangerous criminals in various parts of Italy, all of whom had sworn to kill him.

In every capital in Europe he was known and admired by his *confrères*, and his percentage of success was to them utterly astounding. Yet he spoke little, and was ever modest regarding his own extraordinary achievements. In Florence we had been friends for years, and sometimes at my urgent demand he would relate to me the story of an exciting adventure or a clever capture, narratives that held even me, a *blasé* reader of sensational novels, breathless. Indeed, some of his exploits were more astounding than those of any of the well-known detectives of fiction. And here he was in the flesh,

a man who moved among the most daring criminals in Europe, and was yet so fearless of them that he never carried any other weapon save that stout malacca that never left him.

When presently we were seated in the old dining-room, with its curious frescoed walls representing lake scenery in Lombardy, eating our *minestra*, I asked him of his most recent inquiry.

"Oh, nothing very particular," he laughed, good-humouredly. "You seem always anxious to know about me. I hope you are not going to write anything and bring me in as the hero, or the wicked agent of police," he added, with a humorous twinkle in his merry blue eyes.

"Not at all, my dear Pietro," I assured him. "You have always relied upon my discretion. Your stories are so full of excitement."

"The same as that of every detective, I suppose," he said. "The men at your Scotland Yard have the same experiences."

"No; our criminals are not in league like those you have here—the Mafia, the Camorra, the Black Hand."

"And a dozen others of which the public do not even know the names," added Zoli. "Yes. They give us a good deal of trouble, it is true."

"You have been away lately, I hear. Abroad?" I asked.

"In Switzerland," was his response; and then he silently finished his soup.

When Sandrina had placed the dish of red mullet before me and shuffled out, I again pressed him to relate me his latest exploit, whereupon, with much reluctance, he said:

"I've been inquiring about the Countess Serravalle's jewels that, you will remember, were stolen from her palazzo in Rome a couple of years ago, while she was giving a big political dinner party. The thieves were never found, and the jewels, worth two hundred thousand francs, were never recovered," he said. "All the expert jewel thieves known to be at large were watched in turn—you've seen their photographs in my albums at the Questura—but there was no suspicion against anybody. Therefore we concluded that the international gang had been at work, on account of the extreme neatness of the job. Well, that was two

years ago. About five weeks since I was told by a woman in Ravenna that her husband, whom I wanted, was in prison in Geneva for theft. I had had no suspicion hitherto of the man, but after a long series of inquiries I found that he was at liberty at the time of the jewel robbery, and that his associate, who was also in prison with him, was a man who had been through my hands on several occasions. Well," he went on, after a brief pause, "it was really very simple. My suspicions were aroused by certain theories, so I went to Geneva, told the Chief of Police, and asked him to arrest me for jewel robbery and put me in such a position that during exercise I could speak with the two Italian prisoners. This was done. Very soon I contrived to talk with the pair, who, finding me to be a compatriot, became talkative, and asked for what crime I had been condemned. I replied that I had stolen jewellery. But I need not tell you all the details. It is sufficient to say that I remained nominally a prisoner there for over three weeks, but when I left I had obtained exact information of the spot where the Countess's jewels were buried—in a field about half a mile beyond Prato. Three days

later I dug them up and restored them almost intact to their owner."

And then he attacked the fish with zest and utter unconcern, as though such an ingenious *coup* was of everyday occurrence.

Later, when old Sandrina had served the iced melon and we had gone out upon the terrace to take our coffee and *certosina* in the twilight, I carefully approached the subject uppermost in my mind.

"Do you remember that mysterious affair in the Piazza Vittorio, in Florence, about four years ago?" I asked slowly, drawing at my cigar.

"The one where the young Englishman, a Signor Ingram, was found dead? Yes, perfectly," he said. "A strange affair—very strange."

"Was no arrest ever made?" I asked. "The inquiries were in your hands, were they not?"

"Yes," he answered, briefly, a look of deep reflection suddenly upon his countenance. "But although I was able to solve the mystery, I made no arrest. I might have made one, but for some unaccountable reason the authorities in Rome prevented it."

"Then you actually discovered the assassin?"

"Well, a person cannot be adjudged an assassin until after due trial," he said. "I merely tell you that I followed the suspected person to America."

"And who was it? Tell me. You can rely on my secrecy."

"There is no need for further secrecy," exclaimed the great detective, sipping his liqueur. "The person I followed was a woman—that woman Paolina Demaria. I found her in Chicago earning her living as a milliner's assistant, and passing as a Frenchwoman."

"And why did you not arrest her?" I inquired, endeavouring to remain calm.

"For the reason I have already explained. I was prevented."

"Then you believe her guilty?"

"Most decidedly so," was the shrewd man's response. "But—ah!—I forgot!" he gasped, as he suddenly recollected. "She used to be a friend of yours! I remember seeing you together at the Gambrinus Café, at Doney's, and driving together at the Cascine." And then the great detective's lips closed with a snap.

■

"She was my friend—once," I said, in a hard voice, "but not now. Whatever you say I shall treat in confidence."

"Then the less I say concerning her and her methods the better, Signor Markham. I can only express pleasure that she is not still your friend, because friendship with a woman of her character is dangerous for any man."

"Then you believe she is really what people declare she is—an adventuress?"

The burly, blue-eyed man who usually passed as a German nodded slowly in the affirmative.

"What caused you to form that conclusion?" I inquired. "In this matter let us speak quite openly, as old friends should. It is true I knew her, but after what the gossips said it was impossible to be seen again with her."

"Quite so, signore," he remarked, in a serious voice. "Well, you ask me upon what grounds I formed my conclusions, and I reply that the secret information obtained by my agents gave overwhelming proof that the scandals concerning her were well founded. She borrowed money from the English signore the day before his mysterious death."

"I am aware of that, but I do not see that the mere borrowing of money is any proof against her. Any woman may borrow from a friend. I was in Paris at the time of the affair, and returned here a week later to find she had disappeared, and the hue and cry raised after her."

"The facts were, in themselves, somewhat curious," he said, slowly knocking the ash from his cigar and examining the end critically. "You, of course, know the young English signore was nephew of the British Ambassador to Madrid, and, being a diletante of art, lived in Florence in a pretty suite of rooms on the third floor of the new palazzo next to Bocconi's."

"He was my friend," I said briefly, astounded at his direct and positive condemnation of Paolina.

"The woman's father was a well-known professor, and when he died left her a fair income, and also a gallery of paintings which she had offered for sale but could not find a suitable purchaser. At last, it appears that the English signorino, discovering that there were several works of considerable value among them, approached her with a view of purchasing them, and by this means

the pair met and became friends. He subsequently purchased the paintings for fifty thousand francs, and this sum she used in paying her father's debts. She then shut up her apartments and disappeared for a year. Some said she was in Ostend, others declared her to be in London; but nothing was known of her until she suddenly reappeared in Florence, and became notable on account of her extravagances in dress and entertainments. She had inherited from an aunt in Milan a considerable sum, it was said, and the name of the young Englishman became closely associated with hers. But," he added, "you know, of course—you heard the gossip on every hand. She was your friend—as well as the Signor Ingram's."

"Yes. Well?"

"It was believed that he was very fond of her," he went on. "Our interest at the Questore was naturally aroused, as it always is when anyone makes a sudden display of wealth. We like to know the source of mysterious incomes, you know; therefore, I gave orders for a surveillance to be kept."

"Upon her?"

"Yes, upon her," answered the man who

was declared by Lepine, of Paris, to be the greatest detective in Europe. "There were whispers, and moreover one night at a small restaurant beyond the Cure barrier she was seen dining with a man named Martin, known to be a member of a gang of French adventurers. After dinner they were joined by a second member of the gang, and the trio spent the evening at the Alhambra. While there, information was brought to me, and I went to the theatre myself and watched their movements for a couple of hours. Next day the young Englishman paid a considerable sum of money over to her, and on the following morning when the cook, who lived in the vicinity, entered his room, she found him stretched upon the floor, dead, having been struck in the neck with a very thin, sharp poignard. Some cowardly assassin had, on the previous night, dealt a blow so unerring that death had been almost instantaneous, and he had fallen without a cry."

"Well?" I ejaculated, bending towards him in my eagerness.

"I was called, and found that the top of a heavy steel despatch-box, of that make used by your English Ministry of Foreign

Affairs, had been cut open with some sharp instrument, and the secret cavity in the lid had been emptied of its contents. What it had contained is still a mystery. The assassin, or his accomplice, must have known the exact spot where the secret cavity was, and they had also come prepared with the necessary drill and cutters to effect an opening. Nothing else had been touched. As far as I could discover, the dead man had received no visitors, or at least his servant, whom I questioned closely and against whom there was no shadow of suspicion, had heard nothing. The whole affair was the most complete mystery that has ever presented itself to me, and would still have remained so, were it not for certain curious circumstances."

"And what are they?" I demanded, breathlessly.

"On that same night I made a domiciliary visit to the flat occupied by Paolina Demaria, in the Via Montebello; but she had already fled from Florence, together with the Frenchman, Martin. We thought you, being her friend, would know where she had gone, and you will recollect how, on your return to Florence, I called upon you and

made inquiry. But you were silent; you told me nothing. On searching her apartment, however, I had found, locked in a drawer, the cutters that had been used to open the despatch-box, while in the stove lay a quantity of tinder where she had burnt some papers before flight—probably the documents that had been stolen. With the cutters was a key, which, on being tried, opened the door of the Signorino's flat. Further inquiries showed that she had been seen by a cabman emerging from the palazzo into the street on the evening of the tragedy, and, moreover, on examining the poignard, I detected about the hilt a faint odour of some sweet perfume—the same odour that permeated the drawer in which the handkerchiefs were kept; thus showing me that the weapon had been held concealed in her perfumed handkerchief.

“Upon these facts I had a poster issued offering a substantial reward for the woman's apprehension. But she was too clever for us, and succeeded in getting away to America. Indeed, I had almost given up all hope of discovering her, even though we kept such constant vigilance upon those who had been her friends, when the head of a gang of swindlers,

a man named Vernet, known to his associates as 'The Spider's Eye,' on account of his astuteness, had been arrested in Venice for robbery, and at last our patience was rewarded, for, by intercepting a letter which Paolina wrote to a woman in Bologna who was formerly her maid, I discovered her whereabouts, and having established the true facts, lost no time in crossing to Chicago, armed with a warrant."

"Why did you not arrest her?" I asked.

"Because I received telegraphic instructions from the Ministry in Rome recalling me."

"Then she is not guilty—after all!" I exclaimed with joy.

"On the contrary. There is no shadow of doubt that the young Englishman died by her hand," Zoli said.

"But you have only circumstantial evidence!" I exclaimed quickly. "There is no direct proof."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, with a slight shrug of the shoulders. "She was, of course, your friend! Well, the fact is, her guilt was proved by the Frenchman Vernet, 'The Spider's Eye,' who died of pneumonia in prison a year after his conviction for robbing

an English tourist. He was confined at Lucca, and before his death he sent for me and confessed. He and his companion Martin were accomplices of the woman Paolina. It was she who killed the man. He described in detail the whole affair—a crime ingeniously planned and carefully premeditated."

CHAPTER V.

DESCRIBES A MAN'S PERIL.

THE November evening was wet and cold as I mounted into Walter Guilford's dogcart at Elton station to drive out to Calcot Manor, about a mile from historic Fotheringhay, the old house which, with his chum Robert Alderson, he used as a hunting-box.

On my return from Italy I had gone up to the Highlands, shooting with friends, and October I had spent in Yorkshire and in London. Once only had I heard from Paolina—a brief little note sent to my club, informing me that she was back at Radstone with her friends the Wentworths. Walter had urged me to go down for a week with the hounds, offering me mounts and promising me good sport; therefore I had accepted—more, perhaps, out of a desire to ascertain the true state of my friend's feeling towards Paolina than anything else.

"Well, Chapman," I asked the groom,

an excellent servant whom I had known for years, "and what sort of sport are you having this season?"

"Very fair, sir, up to now. They killed a wonderful lot o' cubs over on the Milton side. Barnard, the huntsman of the Fitzwilliam, says that it's going to be the best season for years. Over at Ashton Wold the foxes run about like mice."

"Mr. Guilford is out a good deal, I suppose?"

"Three days a week, sir; and he hardly missed any morning in the cubbing. Tomorrow the meet's at the Colly Weston cross-roads, so there's sure to be good sport in Cliffe Forest."

The rain was falling heavily as we left the wayside station and went out into the darkness, where our lamps showed the breath of the cob in clouds of steam

"All the old members of the hunt are down as usual, I suppose?" I asked.

"Oh yes, sir; they're all here. Mr. George Fitzwilliam is the master now that Mr. Wright has left, and there's Mr. Henry Wickham and Mr. Birch and Mr. Trower, Mr. Hornsby at Laxton, Mr. Mills at Alwalton, Mr. Wood at Castor, Lord Chesham at

the 'Haycock,' and, of course, old Mr. Frank Gordon, who's ridden nearly fifty years with the pack." And then he went on to enumerate others, a long list including some of the keenest fox-hunters in the country.

The Englishman is, happily, still a lover of horse and hound, even in these degenerate days of motors and motor-cycles. Fox-hunting still flourishes, in spite of every modern difficulty, from the wild moorlands of Northumberland and the craggy mountains of Cumberland and Westmorland to that paradise of the hunting man, the West Country, where, year in and year out, comb and crag echo the cry of hound, of sound of horn. And can any sport be obtained the world over which will beat a fast forty minutes over English pasture behind an English pack of fox-hounds on a good scenting day?

As his father had been, so was Walter an enthusiastic rider to hounds. The old gentleman had been a country squire of that old school of high church, old port, and Conservatism, and at Calcot had kept open house in winter to his hunting friends. The son preserved all the old traditions of

his family regarding the hunt, and as we drove up the broad drive before the long, old-fashioned house, I found him standing at the open door with Bob Alderson, ready to welcome me.

There was nothing of the town-bred elegant about him: tall, dark-haired, well set-up, with handsome, clear-cut features and a hearty thoroughness of manner. Still in his hunting-pink—for he had had a hard day in the top country—he gripped my hand in warm welcome, saying:

"At last, my dear old fellow! It's such an age since you came to have a run with us—nearly three years, I think. By Jove, and you look fit enough. Italy agrees with you. But there—it's your native land, after all," and he laughed mischievously, for he knew that I hated to be called anything but an Englishman.

Bob, about five years his junior, fair-headed and rather podgy, was a quiet humorist, but a magnificent rider. He had been called to the Bar, but had never had any necessity to practise. His mother had a place outside Shrewsbury. In summer he lived with her, played tennis, and idled

generally, and each winter he was Walter's guest for the whole hunting season.

"Get upstairs, old man," cried Walter, when our greetings were over. "Mrs. Richardson will be furious if her food gets cold. We've just twenty minutes to dress. You know your room—the one where the rats eat your boots."

And Anderson, the butler, who had taken my kit-bag, grinned at his master's joke, and conducted me to my room.

Dinner that night in the long, old, panelled dining-room, where the portraits of the dead and gone Guilfords looked down upon us, was a merry meal. Three other men in the neighbourhood, also members of the hunt, were present, and the fun was fast and furious; for Walter was an excellent host. All was based upon the old-fashioned traditions of the house—the unshaded candles in the Georgian candelabra, the removal of the cloth for dessert, the passing of the port decanter along the polished table, and the toast to "fox-hunting"—while the conversation was mostly of runs and prospects. A few "undesirables" had come down from town for the season, and these fell in for their share of pretty trenchant criticism, as

is generally the case. Your fox-hunters have no love of town-bred strangers. We played a friendly hand at bridge in the old chintz-covered drawing-room, and it was past midnight before the guests departed and we three entered Walter's study for a quiet smoke before turning in.

As he stood with his back to the fire, a cigar in his mouth and his hands stuck in the pockets of his dinner-jacket, he looked the perfect type of English gentleman—the man who was heir to a peerage, and yet held in fascination by such a woman as Paolina Demaria.

We had not met for nearly eighteen months. On the previous season I had not been able to get down for my usual week with the hounds, and when I had been in London he had been absent. Both he and Bob Alderson had been sad flirts—not, perhaps, of their own fault, but more because every girl in the district had set her cap at the pair, they being the most eligible young men in the neighbourhood.

The old Earl of Towcester, wealthy and eccentric, lived alone in the gorgeous magnificence of Thornhaugh Hall, his seat in Worcestershire. For years—ever since her

ladyship's death—he had led a lonely, secluded life, being waited upon by Palmer, his old valet, who had been with him half a century. He kept to his room almost constantly, except on very fine days, when he went out in his bath-chair across the park; but it was said that for ten years he had never passed through his own lodge-gates, and that he so disliked women that the domestics, of whom there were nearly thirty, had strict orders to conceal themselves whenever he was in their vicinity. One of his eccentricities, indeed, was his violent dislike to the opposite sex.

Now and then, on very rare occasions, he invited Walter for a few days in order to talk business and expound his wishes regarding certain family matters. Once or twice the old man had actually permitted him to shoot in those great preserves, which teemed with game, but such favours were only bestowed at very rare intervals.

So precarious was the old Earl's health that his death might come at any moment, and my friend might awake one morning to find himself Earl of Towcester, with the fifth largest rent-roll of any nobleman in England.

We were chatting about the old fellow—whom I had met once when I went with Walter to Thornhaugh four years before—and the man with his back to the fire was describing his recent visit and how very feeble the old gentleman had lately become, when Bob suddenly exclaimed :

"Walter hasn't told you the real tit-bit of news, George. You have to congratulate him."

"Upon what?" I asked, in pretended ignorance.

"Upon his engagement—and to an Italian lady, too. You know Italy well; perhaps you may know her."

"An Italian lady!" I exclaimed, looking up at my friend.

"George wouldn't know her, of course," exclaimed Walter quickly. "She has lived a long time in America."

"What's her name?"

"Paolina Delfino. She's staying with the Wentworths over at Radstone."

"Delfino! I don't recollect ever meeting anyone of that name," I said, reflecting that she had not given him her own name of Demaria, and resolving to ascertain the true position of affairs.

"You must meet her, old fellow," he exclaimed enthusiastically. "One day I'll want you to be my best man, you know. Tomorrow we'll run over on the motor, and you'll be able to chatter in Italian to her. I know a smattering of French, but Italian is quite beyond me."

I neither accepted nor declined his invitation to meet her, for, truth to tell, I was undecided how to act. If compelled to meet her it must be as a stranger, and I feared that such fiction would be difficult to sustain before the eyes of an ardent lover.

"And where did you meet her?" I inquired, lighting a fresh cigar, and helping myself to a drink.

"In America, last year."

"You know her people, of course?"

"Well—not exactly. I know of them. She's quite alone in the world."

"Romantic, isn't it?" exclaimed Bob. "When Walter first told me that he'd fallen in love with the fair foreigner you could have knocked me down with the proverbial ostrich plume. Why, only a year before we'd pledged each other never to marry, and here he goes and breaks the pledge at once."

"But the old man declares that I must marry after I succeed to the title," Walter remarked. "Of course, he'd like the future Countess to be an Englishwoman of the nobility, and therefore at present I haven't told him of my intentions."

"And I shouldn't, old chap, if I were you," declared Bob, with frankness. "She's very charming, awfully handsome, and full of grace—indeed, one of the prettiest women I've ever seen in my life, and George will confirm my opinion when he meets her; but she's a foreigner, and against all foreigners we in England entertain a prejudice."

"Yes," I exclaimed, "an absurd prejudice that is characteristic of our insular narrow-mindedness. In other countries it is different. In Italy the Englishwoman or Frenchwoman is welcomed, not suspected; in Germany the smart foreigner is admired and her methods copied; and in Belgium the height of a woman's ambition is to be thought English or French. Yet in England, and especially in the prim provincial society, the ignorant stay-at-homes sneer at the foreigner of either sex, and rejoice in the out-of-date traditions of John Bull. Such traditions were all very well in the days of

Buonaparte, but the Continent moves with the times, and England is slowly but surely being left behind—a long way behind."

"Ah, Markham, you're such an out-and-out cosmopolitan," laughed Walter. "But after all, you are quite right. Already the little tea-and-tennis busybodies about Radstone are asking who Paolina really is, what she was, and whether this and whether that. Why, my dear old chap, half the women in the neighbourhood are gnashing their teeth in jealousy because they've found out for the first time that they don't know how to dress their back hair, or even how to put a skirt on properly."

"Naturally, they're jealous," his friend remarked. "With the exception of May Wentworth there isn't a decent-looking girl within ten miles of Radstone. Perhaps the air and water account for the flat chests, splay feet, and pimples." And after this wholesale condemnation he drained his whiskey-and-soda, and, wishing us good-night, took his candle.

"So you are really engaged, Walter?" I said seriously when we were alone.

"Yes, my dear old chap, and to the most

charming girl in all the world. You'll agree with me—perhaps you'll envy me—when you meet her."

Ah! he did not know how tragically true were his half-jesting words. He was ignorant of the terrible suspicion which the great Zoli had confirmed—the awful secret that was ever gnawing at my heart.

He threw himself into the big armchair, and, lazily stretching out his legs to the fire, related to me the story of their meeting, much as she had already explained.

"And to you, George, old fellow—to you, one of my oldest and most trusted friends, I confess I love her in a manner that I've never loved a woman. I have asked her to become my wife, and she has consented. Therefore, I am the happiest of men. Indeed, I never knew what it was to be absolutely contented until now."

"But you are not contented. No man is really contented," I said. "You are longing now for the day when she becomes your wife."

"Yes, that's true," he said. "We've arranged for it to be in January—a quiet wedding, because we must keep it from the Earl. It's no use upsetting the poor old

fellow unnecessarily. I know he'd object to my marrying a foreign wife."

"No doubt he would," I responded; "and more especially as, after all, you really know so very little about her. In what part of Italy was she born?"

"She's Florentine, and speaks English with a pretty accent that charms everyone."

"And her people? Who were they? How came she in America?"

"She has told me very little, and I feel that inquiry might hurt her feelings. There is probably some family skeleton in the cupboard; but, loving her as I do, I have no wish to exhume it."

I pointed out the foolishness of such an attitude.

"I know, George," he cried petulantly. "You are such a downright pessimist—over-cautious, I think, where women are concerned."

"Women are divided into two classes: the good and the bad. The good are angels, the bad are devils. In the feminine temperament there is no medium. Before choosing a wife a man should see that the good qualities are not mere tinsel."

"You don't mean to hint that Paolina

is not a good woman?" he exclaimed quickly, looking straight into my face.

"My dear old fellow!" I cried, "I never intended to make any such suggestion. I merely express an opinion that it is only just to yourself, as well as to others, to obtain full information as to the lady's antecedents before you make her Countess of Towcester. That's all."

CHAPTER VI.

CONFIRMS CERTAIN CONJECTURES.

NEXT morning was damp, with a splendid scent.

The field was a large one, for the meet at Colly Weston cross-roads was always a popular one with the Fitzwilliam. The scene was picturesque, the smart pink of the men showing bright against the background of brown earth and half-bare trees, and the number of smart women in well-cut habits was unusual for so early in the season.

Hounds quickly found, and Reynard gave us a good run out across Wothorpe, and then, doubling back across the plough, we at last lost him in Cliffe Forest. A second fox we ran from the Forest, away across Apethorpe and along the Gravels to Nasington, the kill taking place close to the railway line. Then, in a spinney at Yarwell, the hounds found again, and went away in full cry towards Bedford Purlieus.

But neither Walter nor I followed, for we knew too well that once in there we should remain until the end of the day.

Therefore, having enjoyed the excellent runs, we turned back about half-past one and slowly cantered home, leaving Bob to follow the hounds, which we still heard giving tone.

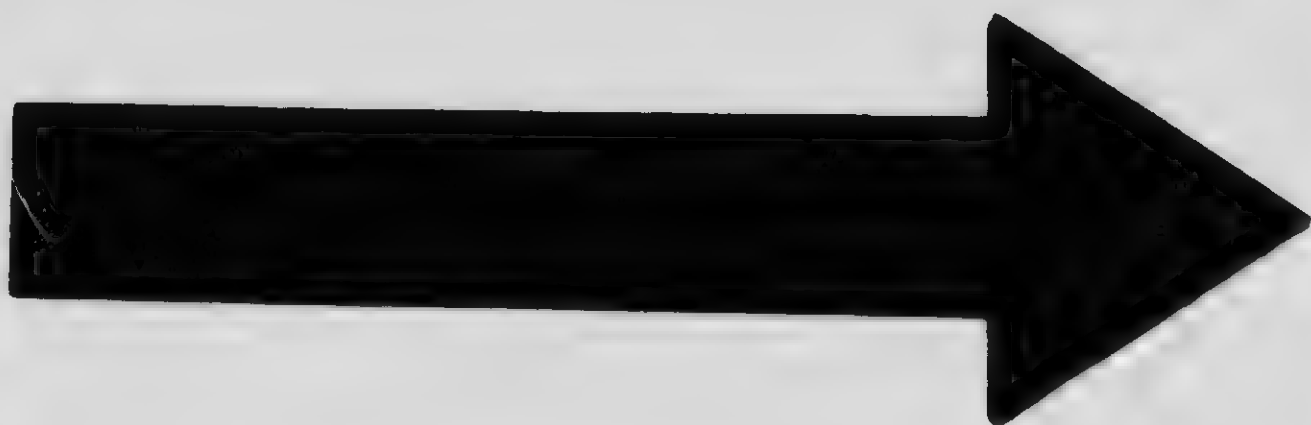
"We'll change and run over to Radstone," Walter said as we rode along past the old church of Fotheringhay. "It will only take an hour and an half on the motor."

"Why not to-morrow?" I suggested, with a feeble attempt to excuse myself from a perilous meeting.

"Because I promised to go over to-day," was his prompt reply. "You must come and be introduced to her."

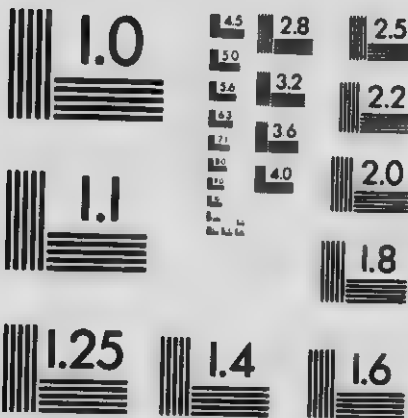
My position was one of greatest difficulty. If I refused, it would be an insult to my friend; if I accepted, I might betray our previous acquaintanceship.

He regarded my silence as consent, and at three o'clock, after a snack of cold luncheon, we set out together with Miles, the chauffeur, to run to the other end of Northamptonshire. After the heavy rain of the previous night the roads were now loose



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and muddy, and in many places the new granite had already been put on, compelling us to slacken speed several times between Oundle and Wellingborough, and to run with caution on the straight high road that led away to Northampton.

As daylight faded and the yellow sun sank behind the trees it grew colder, the keen east wind cut our faces, and we were glad enough of our fur-coats and goggles. Miles knew the road well, taking his master over it several times each week, and, notwithstanding its bad state, the twenty horsepower car ran like a clock, and, regardless of police traps, went nearly forty miles an hour out on the straight between Wilby and Weston Favell. Through Northampton we went slowly; then, after lighting the big acetylene head-lamps when on the other side of the town, we ran at top-speed to Blisworth, and thence to Whittlebury, afterwards travelling by the by-roads to Radstone, where, passing the small village, with its quaint old church with the saddle-back roof, we continued for a quarter of a mile or so until, with the sound of the horn, we suddenly turned into the long, sweeping drive of a comfortable old-fashioned Queen

Anne house, which I found was Radstone Grange.

Ere we had pulled up before the big portico the door had been thrown open and two female figures stood silhouetted against the light within. One was slim and unfamiliar to me, but the other I instantly recognised as Paolina.

"Wal-tare ! Wal-tare !" I heard her cry excitedly ; then, noticing that her lover was not alone, she drew back in silence and waited for us to enter.

In fear that she should betray surprise at our sudden meeting, I descended, still disguised in my dark goggles.

"Let me introduce to you, Paolina, my old friend, Mr. George Markham," Walter exclaimed. "He knows your country, and speaks your language."

I saw her start, and noticed she turned pale ; yet with admirable self-control she bowed, smiled, and held out her hand to me, while a moment later, when I had removed my ugly glasses, I was presented to her companion, May Wentworth, a pretty fair-haired girl of twenty-two or so.

"I have heard Mr. Guilford speak of you many times ; and once, about three years

ago, I saw you out hunting," she said. And then we entered the hall, threw off our heavy coats, and were conducted by the girls into the warm, cosy drawing-room where Mrs. Wentworth, an old lady in a bright cap, was sitting with a dark-haired, strikingly pretty girl, whom May introduced as her cousin, Dora Hallett. As she rose and bowed to me I saw that she was well-dressed in cream cloth, rather tall, with a neat figure, large luminous eyes, and a quick vivaciousness of manner.

In order to allow Paolina freedom to recover from her surprise, I began to chat with May and Dora. The first-named was neither so tall nor so handsome as her cousin, but rather of that soft, fair type of sweet-faced beauty which is so essentially English. Her complexion was good, with the healthy peach bloom of youth still upon her cheeks; her waist narrow and well-girdled; and her carriage swinging and graceful; her eyes of that deep, almost child-like blue; and her fair hair dressed simply and becomingly.

Dora, on the other hand, was smarter, more athletic, quicker of intelligence; and, from her conversation, I gathered that she was keen on all out-door sports, from hockey

to hunting. She was, I afterwards learnt, on a visit to Radstone ; for, with her father, Sir Edmund Hallett, a retired Anglo-Indian, she lived at Bournemouth.

From the first moment we met both girls charmed me, but Dora I preferred. She seemed to have mixed with a smarter and more go-ahead set than May, whose provincialisms were sometimes very pronounced.

While we chatted, Walter talked with the woman he loved ; but, fortunately, he did not detect any change in her. The red-shaded lamp concealed her deathly pallor, and by a covert glance she gave me I saw that she was entirely mystified at the motive of my visit there. By the exercise of that subtle tact and clever diplomacy innate in Italian women, she kept up the fiction that we were strangers.

As I glanced at her, standing near the fire with the man who, ignorant of the past, had promised her marriage, I noted how superb and queenly she looked, her dark beauty shown to advantage by her gown of pastel blue cloth. Her figure was such as every woman envied, and as she stood, laughing lightly, with musical cadence, with the man lounging at her side, I won-

dered what were her innermost thoughts regarding my presence there—the skeleton at the feast. An injudicious word or look might mean our betrayal.

“Come, George, old fellow, you must talk Italian with Paolina,” Walter cried suddenly across to me, with a word of apology to Mrs. Wentworth; and, thus summoned, I was compelled to rise and approach the pair, not, however, without considerable trepidation.

“The signorina is Florentine, my friend tells me,” I remarked in Italian, for want of something better to say.

“Si signore,” she laughed, and then she complimented me upon my Italian, declaring that my Tuscan aspirate—that most difficult ordeal for an Englishman—was perfect.

“I lived in Tuscany a good many years, signorina,” I said. “Near Florence—at Santa Lucia, above the Arno.”

“At Santa Lucia!” she exclaimed, with a feigned surprise that was admirable. “Oh! I know the old place quite well. My father used to take me there years ago. Ah! Signor Markham, what a view one obtains from there, away over the valley to Prato and Pistoja!” she said with a sweep of her

hand. "Padre Guiseppe, the *proposto* of San Martino, was my father's friend. Do you remember him?"

"Quite well: a merry old fellow, generous to the poor, and very fond of his snuff—a particularly pungent variety."

"Ah!" she laughed. "Do you, too, recollect his big old horn box that he used to tap so loudly and offer to the gossips in that little piazza where the iron cross stands before the cool old loggia?"

And so, in order to cover her anxiety and confusion, she rattled on, recalling memories of those scenes which we both, alas! recollected too well; speaking of the friends of our childhood without, however, arousing within her fond lover any suspicion of the truth.

At first I felt eager to withdraw, fearing that we might betray our previous acquaintance; but her marvellously tactful conversation gave me renewed courage, and though she were condemned by Zoli as the murderess of Fred Ingram, I was compelled to laugh with her in chorus.

May Wentworth and Dora were on the opposite side of the room discussing with the old lady some plans for a charity con-

cert at Brackley, when Mr. Wentworth himself entered—a tall, thin, grey-haired old gentleman in grey tweed coat and well-worn riding breeches. He was clean-shaven, keen-featured, with a reddish, weather-beaten countenance, for he was essentially an out-door man who, in his younger days, before the depreciation in the value of agricultural land, had been a well-known coaching man. His teams had then been the best in the Midlands, and he was constantly on the road.

His greeting was hearty and his hand-clasp firm when we were introduced, and as he stood astride upon the fur hearthrug before the fire, he began to question us about our run with the hounds with all the keen interest of the ardent fox-hunter.

"The signore is staying with Signor Guilford?" asked the handsome Italian woman presently, to which I replied in the affirmative.

Our eyes met, and I saw in hers an uneasy look of inquiry and apprehension. As we had arranged on that day at Brighton, we had met as strangers before the man who loved her, yet she knew too well that, as I forbade her to marry him, her

position as his betrothed was an entirely false one.

What, I wondered, would Wentworth and his wife say if they knew who their guest really was? The family was, I understood from Walter, in rather straitened circumstances; therefore she was what is known in genteel circles in the provinces as a "paying guest"—the friend who is a secret source of income. They, however, treated her as one of themselves, probably on account of their friendship for Walter, for old Mr. Wentworth and Walter's father had for many years been most intimate friends. Both May and Dora seemed to have taken to the handsome foreigner, whom they addressed as "dear" and "carissima," and whose mistakes in English grammar they were constantly correcting. If they knew the truth, would the Wentworths, people of high respectability, allow their daughter to associate with the notorious woman whose portrait and misdeeds appeared on that glaring poster which had been so widely circulated over the Continent, and which at the very moment was pigeon-holed at Scotland Yard?

I remembered the open denunciation of

Pietro Zoli, and stood utterly amazed at her impudent attempt to marry the man who was my friend, and who had so foolishly fallen beneath the spell of her remarkable beauty.

With Walter standing by, we chatted on in Italian, but I recollect little of what meaningless words I uttered, until a quarter of an hour later when he went out of the room with old Mr. Wentworth, who wanted to show him a new gun which had that day arrived from London. Then she turned to me and asked quickly in Italian, knowing neither Mrs. Wentworth nor the two girls could understand :

"Why are you here? I thought you would spare me this."

To conceal her reproach she uttered the words in a half jesting tone, for she was a wonderful actress.

"I did not come here of my own accord. I was compelled," was my response.

"And he suspects nothing? Are you quite certain?"

"Quite," I replied. "But recollect what I said in Brighton. You shall never marry that man—he is my friend."

"You told me that three months ago,"

she laughed, shrugging her well-formed shoulders, while May and Dora sat endeavouring in vain to ascertain the nature of our conversation, their feminine curiosity shown in both their faces.

"I say what I mean," was my brief remark.

"What! You would expose me?"

"If you dare to disobey," I said firmly.

"Therefore break this attachment, for it can only end in disaster to you."

Then turning to Mrs. Wentworth, who was sitting by the fire doing some fancy needlework, I said in English in as quiet a tone as I could command:

"I was telling the signorina what a pleasant time I always have over at Calcot. I love a run with the hounds, even though my friends tell me I'm too much of a cosmopolitan to really appreciate it."

"You talk just like an Italian," declared Dora, who, I saw, had vainly striven to penetrate the mystery of our discourse. Perhaps from our faces she had detected something serious in our words. Probably she had

"Signor Markham speaks quite as well as I do. His accent is absolutely perfect.

He is the first Englishman whom I have ever heard talk Italian perfectly," Paolina declared. "Our language is not at all difficult to learn, but most difficult to pronounce. Few foreigners, indeed, could ever pass as Italians in Italy, but the signore is one of those. Had I not known he was English, I should have at once taken him for a born Tuscan."

"Well, signorina," I laughed, "I lived there fifteen years and could speak your Tuscan tongue almost before I could talk English."

And thus we contrived to conceal from our hearers the real nature of our defiant conversation.

Ten minutes later Paolina very cleverly suggested that we should go together and find her host and Walter in the gun-room. Therefore, when we were alone in the hall, she managed to whisper to me in a soft, eager voice :

"Why is it that you do not trust me, George? Do you believe that at Brighton I lied to you? Are you still suspicious of me?"

For a moment I was silent, then I replied in the negative.

"Meet me alone somewhere," she said quickly and in deep earnestness. "I must see you. I know that I am in peril here, and I fear every hour that Walter should suspect."

"Why?"

"On account of an untoward incident that occurred three days ago," was her hard, strained answer. "On the high road outside Bedford I met someone—someone who recognised me."

"And you believed yourself safe?"

"Until then. But my presence here is known to my enemies. They may go to the police and denounce me, and then——" And she left her sentence unconcluded.

"But who recognised you?"

"An enemy—from Florence. Ah! you don't know, George. You cannot know the awful fear that has been upon me ever since—the constant terror of exposure—of arrest!"

"I thought the police had withdrawn their hue and cry, or surely Zoli would have taken you back to Italy from Chicago?"

"That may be so, but the person with whom I came face to face will certainly contrive to encompass my ruin. Ah! if I

dared to tell you all, George—you would pity me. I wanted to tell you all before I fled from Florence, but it was impossible. There were things that I could not possibly explain. I—I dare not tell you."

"But you will dare. Meet me and tell me," I urged. "Where can we see each other? I'll be at Brackley Station at two o'clock on the day after to-morrow. Be there and follow me to some place where we can speak in secret."

And as at that moment the door of the gun-room at the end of the big old-fashioned hall opened and Walter emerged with the squire, further exchange of confidences was precluded. When, however, we took leave of each other a couple of hours later, she managed to whisper in Italian that she would keep the tryst.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SHAME OF THE SIGNORINA.

ON the morning of the day of our appointment I announced the necessity of having to go up to London on urgent business and having promised to return by the evening train, Chapman drove me over to Oundle Station whence, by a circuitous route, I travelled to Brackley.

With regret I had seen how entirely fascinated Walter was by the woman whom he intended to marry, and on the previous evening, when Bob was smoking alone with me, he remarked in confidence our friend's utter disregard for Paolina's past.

"His whole thoughts are of her," he declared; "and, between you and me, he seems utterly blind. It never seems to occur to him that it is to her interest to marry him and become a Countess. I gave Walter credit for more shrewdness, but I

suppose," he added with a sigh, "when a man's in love he's utterly lost to reason."

"But haven't you pointed out the dangerous folly of accepting any woman at her own valuation?" I asked.

"Of course I have, my dear old fellow; but I'm only told to mind my own business. Therefore, what can I do?"

"You don't like her, eh?"

"She's handsome enough, and all that, but—well, I have my suspicions," he answered.

"Suspicions! What of?"

"I can't tell you exactly—at least, at present."

And I fell to wondering whether, by any means, the truth had been unexpectedly revealed to him.

"If you'll tell me what you suspect we might act together and save him from making a fool of himself over her."

"At present I can't, George; therefore we may as well drop the question now that we are both agreed that she's not the kind of woman to become Countess of Towcester. We are both Walter's friends, and our duty is to protect his interests. He's far too good-hearted, too generous, too prone to

believe that everyone is honest like himself."

And at that moment the subject of our conversation lounged into the room, flung himself into his own big arm-chair, and clasped his hands behind his head.

When I alighted at Brackley shortly after two o'clock, gave up my ticket, and emerged from the station, I saw a neat figure in a black tailor-made gown following me, according to arrangement. Turning out of the station, I found myself in an old-fashioned, picturesque market town on high, elevated ground commanding extensive views of the surrounding country. The main street which I traversed, was a long one with an avenue of trees, until suddenly I came to what proved to be the high road out of the town to Banbury, and taking it, I continued on for nearly a mile without turning back, well knowing, however, that Paolina was following me. Suddenly noticing to my right an old stone stile leading to a foot-path across a private park, I crossed it, and entered one of the fine avenues of old elms which led from three directions up to a large mansion half a mile distant, and there

I halted beneath the trees at a spot where none could see us.

Paolina came forward quickly, with her black-gloved hand outstretched and an expression of welcome upon her lips. She wore a thick spotted veil which half concealed her features, yet her remarkable grace of carriage, and natural daintiness, which betrayed her foreign birth, she could not disguise.

"Ah, George!" she exclaimed in Italian as we walked slowly together among the dead leaves, "I am so glad you have come. It was very difficult for me to get away. Mrs. Wentworth wanted May to come with me. She has apparently promised Walter that May or Dora shall accompany me whenever I go out."

"Well, you are here, and no one has seen you or suspected," I laughed.

"Yes," she said, her face showing pale through the veil; "but every moment that I remain in this neighbourhood increases my peril."

"How? Tell me."

"Ah, I know that you suspect me of lying to you, George," she cried in a hoarse, broken voice. "You believe that I am both

unfit and unworthy to be the wife of an honest man."

"If I thought you were innocent, Paolina," I said very gently, taking her hand at the same time, "if I thought you were, I should ask you to become mine."

"No," she exclaimed, withdrawing her hand from my grasp, "your confidence in me is shaken by certain unfortunate occurrences, and it can never be restored. I only ask you, for the sake of our dead love, to still remain my friend."

"I am your friend," I declared. "My presence here to-day is surely sufficient proof of it."

"Tell me frankly, do you still suspect that I am guilty?" she asked in a low, earnest tone.

"I am waiting for you to prove your innocence," was my firm reply; for her question aroused within me recollection of that condemnation which Pietro Zoli had uttered.

"I know! I know! You fear that I shall marry Walter," she said quickly; "but have we not made a compact? I shall keep it—never fear."

"But this person who has recognised

you. Tell me how it occurred," I said, when I had explained the reason I was guest at Calcot, and my determination that she should not marry before her innocence was established.

"I was on the motor one afternoon with May, Dora, and Mr. Wentworth, when just at the entrance to the town of Bedford we had a tire burst, and of course we got down to allow the chauffeur to put on the new cover we had in reserve. The road was a suburban one of small villas like all your English towns, therefore we idled up and down while Mr. Wentworth helped Marshall to adjust the tire. Just before the damage had been made good there came along two men dragging a piano-organ, and they stopped close to us and began to play."

"They were Italians, and recognised you, eh?"

"Yes; unfortunately I had removed my goggles and put my motor veil aside, otherwise my disguise would have been complete and I need not have feared anything. As it was, however, I turned and faced them. The younger man stopped for a moment, so utterly astounded was he, and the elder was about to rush forward, only he gripped his

arm and held him back. But I saw the evil look upon his face, I noticed the exultant expression upon the other's countenance, and I knew that my dream of happiness and my peace of mind were at an end. They mean mischief."

"They did not speak to you?"

"No; they looked at each other and smiled meaningly. Ah, you don't know those people—who and what they are. I do. Three minutes after they had recognised me we were on our way to Huntingdon. They did not, of course, attempt to claim acquaintance with me. They merely noted the number of the car, so that their attack might be made in secret."

"But who were the people?"

"My enemies—my bitterest enemies!"

"You fear them?"

"They are the only persons I fear in all the world," was her answer in a low, trembling voice. "They intend to strike their terrible vendetta. They have searched for me—and have, alas! found me."

I was silent for a few moments; then, halting suddenly, I asked in an earnest voice, looking into her wonderful eyes:

"Paolina, tell me the truth. Is there

no one else you fear save those wandering musicians ? ”

“ No one. Why ? ”

“ There was a man named Vernet—Felix Vernet—whom you once knew, the man known to his associates as ‘ The Spider’s Eye.’ ”

She started, glaring at me open-mouthed at mention of her secret accomplice, the head of a band who were veritable spiders of society.

“ Fear him ! Why should I fear him ? ” she gasped.

It occurred to me that she knew of his death, and the dead were not to be feared.

“ You best know the reason yourself,” I answered, remembering the words of the great detective.

“ I do not understand you, George. What do you insinuate ? ” she asked suddenly, quite calm.

“ That the man Vernet was your friend—that he was in possession of your secret.”

“ My secret ! Of what ? ”

“ Of the truth concerning the tragic end of poor Fred Ingram.”

She did not answer for several minutes, but by the grey wintry light that filtered

through the branches of the half-bare trees I saw that her face had blanched to the lips.

"He knew the truth. I did not," she faltered.

"And this pair you encountered in Bedford the other day also knew the truth, eh?" I asked meaningly. "Come, Paolina, it is useless to try and deceive me. It is all too apparent."

"Ah!" she cried suddenly, as though the real situation had only just dawned upon her. "I see! You believe that the man who recognised me is aware of my guilt—that I am in fear of his denunciation!" And she laughed aloud.

I knew her quick, passionate temperament too well. At times she was sweet and simple as a child, at others as crafty and cunning as the most experienced diplomatist who ever wore uniform. One side of her complex character was soft and tender, full of pity and deep sympathy for the poor and oppressed; while the other was directly opposed to frankness—keen, crafty, and utterly unscrupulous.

"When will you believe in me?" she asked, looking at me unflinchingly.

"When I am convinced that you are not deceiving me."

"Then you regard all that I tell you as lies—you think that I am not in peril?"

"I believe you are in peril for reason of your conscience being burdened by a guilty knowledge," I said frankly.

"By a guilty knowledge, yes. But not by my own gui't," was her prompt reply. "Do you recollect what I swore to you in Brighton—that I was innocent? Well, I swear to you here again, George, upon the thing I hold most sacred—upon the tomb of my dear mother, who may suffer all the tortures of purgatory if I tell you an untruth—I am innocent of that terrible crime of which I have been accused."

"You swear you were in no way connected with the events which culminated in poor Fred's death?" I demanded quickly.

"No," she replied hoarsely after a pause; "I will not swear that. I only vow that I am not a murderess."

"Then you took part in the cowardly plot against him; you had in your hands those papers stolen from his despatch-box. Deny that, if you dare!"

She made no answer. Her white lips

moved in faint defence, but no sound came from them.

And as she walked on unsteadily in silence I knew that at last I had gained knowledge of the truth. If she did not actually deal the blow, as her dying accomplice Vernet had alleged, she was, nevertheless, responsible for the mysterious plot which had for its object the cowardly assassination of Ingram.

All the love I had held for her—that sweet, cherished affection and tender ideals of happy youthful days—turned in that one moment to disgust and loathing.

She saw the expression upon my countenance, and ere I could evade her she caught my hand again, and, bursting into tears, begged forgiveness.

"Ah, George, do not be so cruel to me!" she implored. "Heaven alone knows the tortures of conscience that I suffer. Yet I am not guilty, as you believe; I am trying to atone for the past, to show you that I am not altogether worthless. Bear with me a little while. I do not ask much. I am in peril—in dire peril of my life, for an imminent danger threatens me of which you have no knowledge. And if I fall a victim, I fear I may, having no friend in whom I can confide

or who will act as my protector, then you will at least learn to still regard Paolina—the woman you once loved—as one who died persecuted, helpless, and misjudged.”

“I have already advised you to end this fatal fascination which you hold over Walter Guilford,” I said coldly.

“He loves me. His love is the only little happiness I have left in life, hounded as I am. You will surely not deny me that, George?” she said reproachfully.

“Tell me,” I urged, disregarding her appeal, “who were this pair whom you encountered in Bedford?”

“My enemies. They have come to England in search of me.”

“And although you say they mean mischief, you will not tell me their names?”

“No, I will not,” was her firm response. “It is better that you should remain in ignorance. They knew me in the old days when—when you and I loved each other.”

“What am I to infer from your answer?”

“Nothing,” was her half-whispered response, “except that although Walter Guilford has asked me to be his wife I—unworthy woman that I am, condemned for a crime that I did not commit, and branded

as an adventuress—still love you, George, and still beseech your forbearance and pity!" And her dark eyes, full of the light of fierce passion, fixed themselves upon mine unflinchingly.

"Love me!" I gasped, amazed at her confession, and standing immovable like one turned to stone, a thousand conflicting thoughts at that moment surging through my brain. "Love me, Paolina! Ah, no, impossible—impossible! Love between us is sheer madness."

Then for the first time I recognised the danger of that clandestine meeting.

"But you will save me from those people—from those fiends who have discovered me!" she begged, clinging to me suddenly with trembling hands.

"How can I?"

"By coming at once to me at the moment when I send for you, by hiding me if I find it necessary to hide from them, by standing as my friend. Ah! you do not know the peril in which I now stand—you do not know the bitter vengeance which actuates them, or the terrible fate to which they intend to consign me. But if you cannot love me, George, you will at least take pity

upon my helplessness—will you not ? ” And grasping my hand again, she raised it with reverence to her lips.

At that instant a rustling of the dead leaves behind me caused me to glance back, and next instant my heart stood still within me.

My companion, quick to notice my dismay, cast a glance in the direction I was gazing, and, recognising the situation, started and drew back breathless.

“ Betrayed ! ” she gasped hoarsely in Italian. “ Betrayed ! ”

May Wentworth, who with a woman's natural curiosity had apparently followed her friend upon her mysterious errand to Brackley, had approached us unnoticed, and stood in the shadow, half hidden by the trunk of a great elm, eagerly watching us !

She had heard Paolina's words ; she had seen her cling to me, and had witnessed her, in her passionate entreaty, declare her love for me and kiss my hand !



"SHE HAD HEARD PAOLINA'S WORDS."

CHAPTER VIII.

CONTAINS A CONFESSION.

THERE was but one way in which to extricate ourselves from that compromising position.

May had turned on finding herself observed, and was walking hastily away towards the high road. Therefore, without a single moment's reflection, I dashed after her, and was quickly at her side.

"You, no doubt, think this a very strange procedure, Miss Wentworth," I said breathlessly. "You have, no doubt, inwardly condemned me as a man who has played his friend false; but I beg of you to listen to my explanation."

"I do not see that any is needed, Mr. Markham," she responded coldly. "Paolina was very anxious to get away this afternoon, and, my curiosity being aroused, I followed her here and saw you meet."

At that moment Paolina approached, without, however, uttering a word.

"I admit that this meeting was an ill-advised one, Miss Wentworth," I said; "but I would beg of you, for Paolina's sake, as well as for my own, to let it remain a confidential matter between us. I know that on the face of it our conduct is unpardonable, but when I tell you in strictest confidence that we are old friends—friends of our childhood days—I think you will be inclined to view the matter more leniently. We met under your father's roof, and there were certain matters which we desired to discuss, and therefore I suggested this meeting. I alone am to blame."

"Paolina appealed to you. I watched her," she remarked with distinct suspicion.

"She thanked me for my congratulations upon her engagement," I responded. "You evidently mistook her gesture for one of appeal. No, Miss Wentworth, I hope that I shall never so far forget myself as to be false to my friends, either male or female. Paolina, whom I have known ever since a child, and have not seen for years, is to marry Walter. What more natural than we

should meet in secret and tell each other the truth ? ”

“ About what ? ”

“ About the past. Everyone has a past.”

“ You surely do not think I would for one moment act disloyally to Wal-tare,” exclaimed Paolina in her pretty broken English. “ No, my dear May, you will promise to say nothing—nothing—will you not ? ”

The other hesitated. She saw that Paolina’s future was entirely in her hands, and, like every woman, was disinclined to give any pledge which should deprive her of such power as she now held.

We both urged May to allow the affair to remain secret between us, for I declared that between Paolina and myself there was no love attachment. She knew that I was Walter’s friend, and as such desired to question me and ask my advice upon several points ; and so, as we strolled back to the high road, I gradually managed to persuade May to remain silent.

She was decidedly pretty, and although I felt anxious and that she should have followed her friend and acted as eavesdropper, yet, after all, I could not blame her. We our-

selves were at fault. We ought to have been more wary. When at last she gave her promise to say nothing regarding our meeting, Paolina pressed her hand, thanking her with eyes full of tears.

"A word from you, my dear, might cause Wal-tare to forsake me," she faltered. "He would never forgive my meeting the Signor Markham. Before him we met as strangers, and we must carry out that fiction to the very end."

"You loved each other once—you and Mr. Markham," the girl suggested in a low tone. "Admit it."

In answer I replied in the affirmative, adding, "But those days have long since passed; therefore why should Walter's suspicions be aroused? Every woman loves in her girlhood days, and a man's first love is never lasting."

"Yes; you are right after all, Mr. Markham," she sighed; and thus, being convinced that we had both told her the truth, her indignation gave place to a quiet sympathy and an assurance that no word of what she had witnessed in the avenue at Steane should pass her lips.

Then we went back through Brackley

town, and I walked with them along the highway half way towards Radstone. At the cross-roads I raised my hat.

To May I said :

" You know our secret, Miss Wentworth. Remember our future—and more especially Paolina's—is entirely in your hands."

She gazed straight into my face with a look which somehow struck me as curious. There was a slight fluttering of the eyelids, a downward sweep of the fair lashes, and a faint flush upon the cheek that afterwards caused me to ponder.

" You may trust in me, Mr. Markham," she declared. " I will be silent as long as I am assured that Paolina is not playing Walter false."

What did she mean by those words ? I wondered, as I walked back to Brackley station at a swinging pace. Was it possible that she suspected that I actually loved Paolina ? I recollected her confession of affection. Was it also possible that May resented it on my account ? Her loyalty towards Walter was, I felt convinced, only feigned. That shy, half-abashed look in her face, and that slight colour had, in an instant, aroused within me a suspicion,

astounding and amazing—one that dwelt within me all that evening as I sat smoking and chatting with my host and Bob Alderson.

If any unguarded word or look of mine on that evening when I had visited at Radstone had betrayed my previous acquaintance with Paolina, probably that was why May had followed her to her tryst with me. Or was it jealousy that had prompted her to follow and to watch?

I recognised the situation was growing hourly more unsafe, especially now that Paolina had confessed before her friend that she still entertained for me a fierce and passionate affection.

My better judgment told me to return to London and there await Paolina's summons to render her the assistance I had promised, and yet with a weakness that is but mortal in every man I lingered on at Calcot.

My invitation had been for a week only, but I had allowed myself to be persuaded by Walter to remain a few days longer. There were several good meets in prospect—at Ashton Wold, at Burghley, and at the "Haycock" at Wansford—all of which

gave promise of good sport, and I must confess I dearly loved fox-hunting.

One Friday, a fortnight later, when hounds did not meet, Mrs. Wentworth brought the three girls over by train to Elton, and Walter met them at the station with the motor. A visit to a bachelor's quarters is always of interest to women of whatever age. With Bob I went round the house and opened the windows wide to get rid of the odour of over-night cigars prior to their arrival, and together we "tidied up" the study. Walter and Bob were always the despair of Mrs. Richardson, the housekeeper, and Mrs. Wentworth, on entering, raised her lorgnon and regarded everything with a critical smile. The old house was an ideal bachelor's abode, for since his mother's death Walter had hardly ever used the big old drawing-room with its inlaid Sheraton furniture and fine old Nankin and Worcester china. The room was long, pleasant, and sunny, with two windows looking out upon what in summer was a beautiful old-world flower garden, now, however, only a dreary waste.

On that day the big old apartment was opened and aired, with a blazing wood fire in honour of our guests, and we were quite

a merry party assembled there. After luncheon, at which Mrs. Wentworth presided, Walter lent Paolina and Dora motor-hats and veils, which he always kept for the use of his lady visitors, and with Bob took them, at Paolina's request, for a run as far as Peterborough to see the Cathedral, leaving me at home with Mrs. Wentworth and her daughter.

Half an hour later, when May contrived to be alone with me in Walter's study, she sank into his big arm-chair, and, throwing back her fair well-formed head upon the red silk cushion, suddenly exclaimed :

"Mr. Markham, I asked you in here because I have something very important to say to you. I have never told you that four years ago my mother and I spent the winter in Florence—at Paoli's. While there, I one day saw you at a reception at the Consul-General's, but we were not introduced. You were with a friend of yours, named Ingram—Mr. Fred Ingram—who had an apartment in the Piazza Vittorio."

"Yes," I gasped, looking at her in surprise ; "Fred was my most intimate friend."

"And one evening, ten days later, the poor fellow was discovered dead in his own

room—murdered, they said, by an Italian woman, who afterwards disappeared," she said in a low, hoarse voice, all the colour having died from her countenance. "Do you recollect that woman's surname?"

"Recollect it? Why?" I asked, utterly staggered at her inquiry.

"Because you were her friend, it was said. The police of Europe have searched in vain for her, but she has never yet been traced. I—I want you to help me to find her," she said earnestly, with hidden fire in her blue eyes.

"Why?"

"Because—well, I will confess to you in strictest confidence," she faltered in a broken voice. "Poor Fred—was my lover! That woman, who, they say, was an adventuress of the worst type, killed him because she was jealous of me!"

I was silent—utterly dumfounded. The terrible truth the girl had revealed staggered me.

We talked on, but what mechanical words I uttered I do not recollect.

I was glad enough when a few minutes later her mother came in search of us, and then, excusing myself, I escaped down

the garden to the riverside and there smoked a cigar and pondered.

May noticed the effect her confession had upon me, but was silent; and when the men brought the two girls back Dora's merry laughter again rang through the old house. Then, after tea, when it had grown dark, Walter took the party in the motor back to Elton station—not, however, before May had whispered to me in a low, earnest voice as I helped her on with her coat.

"Remember, Mr. Markham, I rely upon you to keep my secret as you rely upon me."

She mounted into the tonneau, and a moment later, with the glaring head-lamps showing a bright white light, the party glided away down the drive, Bob and I shouting our adieux.

The next day the meet was at Kate's Cabin on the Great North Road, and we had an enjoyable run with glad choruses through Huntingdonshire; while on Monday we found in Sutton Wood on the other side of the Nene, and ran across to Easton Hill, hounds giving us a splendid melody nearly the whole day.

On the following morning, as the meet

was at Laxton Hall, nearly fifteen miles distant, I was down betimes. Bob had gone up to London on Saturday, and had not returned; but as I entered the study I found Walter, ready dressed in his hunting pink and boots, standing with Chapman, the groom.

"George!" he exclaimed in a low, trembling voice, his countenance white to the lips, "prepare yourself for bad news."

"Bad news? From where?" I gasped, staring at him.

"From Radstone," was his husky response. "A terrible affair has happened there—a mystery!"

CHAPTER IX.

BY WHICH SOMETHING IS REVEALED.

"WHAT has happened?" I cried, looking from master to man, and realising from their faces that something very serious had occurred.

"Tell him, Chapman; tell him what you've just heard," Walter said in a hard, bitter voice.

"Well, sir," exclaimed the groom, twisting his cap around his fingers, "I was comin' back from Oundle station with the luggage-cart half an hour ago and heard a motor comin' up behind me. Just as it was passing me I recognised it as Mr. Wentworth's, so I hailed Marshall, who was driving her along, and 'e at once stopped and told me that our meeting was most fortunate. He had an urgent message for Mr. Guilford, but it was bad news, and 'e'd rather I broke it to him than he. Then he told me the terrible

thing what's—well, what's happened at the Grange, sir; how, when Miss May's maid went into her room this morning, she found the poor young lady dead."

"May dead!" I gasped, open-mouthed.

"Yes, sir. She's been murdered, Marshall says."

"How? By whom?" I asked breathlessly.

"Nobody knows. It's all a complete mystery, sir. Miss Hallett sent Marshall in the car to ask you and Mr. Guilford to go over there at once."

"Good heavens! This is an awful affair, Walter!" I exclaimed, turning to my friend.

"We'd better change and get over there at once. They evidently want us. The poor girl murdered! Surely there's some mistake!"

"I fear not, sir," Chapman said. "Marshall is waiting with the car out at the back gate. He's putting in petrol."

We both went immediately to our rooms, slipped off our coats and riding-breeches, and got into tweeds, swallowed a cup of coffee each, and ten minutes later were on the car travelling over the muddy roads in the grey, cheerless morning.

Marshall, the smart chauffeur, spoke little, giving only the briefest answers to our eager questions, and occupying himself in the driving, for we were travelling at top speed, and, there being a little mist about, it required all his attention to keep a good look out ahead at the corners. At places where the floods had been out we tore through seas of mud, and the morning wind was piercingly keen.

The man either did not know any further details of the startling affair, or, if he did, he was disinclined to discuss them. As for Walter and myself, we were so full of our own bewildered thoughts that few words passed between us. Up steep hills and down sharp inclines, the car ran like a clock at tearing pace, while we blew our horn continuously because of the fog which grew more dense beyond Northampton, until at last we slipped through Radstone village and swung into the wide, sweeping drive before the Grange.

Dora, white-faced and scared, opened the door to us, and conducted us both to the small, cosy, book-lined room on the left of the big hall which the squire used as his study.

"It is so good of you to come," she exclaimed breathlessly, looking into my eyes for a moment. "A most awful thing has happened. The police from Northampton have just come, and are upstairs with my uncle."

"Tell us all about it," I urged. "Marshall has explained practically nothing."

"May—poor May!" she cried, bursting into tears. "Oh, it is really too awful! Mason, when she went in with her early cup of tea as usual this morning, found her dead—strangled by a silk cord from her dressing-gown."

"Strangled!" exclaimed Walter. "Then it was a case of suicide?"

"No—murder. The police are confident that the poor girl's life has been wilfully taken," she said hoarsely. "But if you go upstairs you can see for yourself. Ah! it is terrible—an awful blow to both my uncle and aunt, for she was their only child."

"Are the police upstairs now?"

She nodded in the affirmative, overcome at her cousin's tragic end.

Then with Walter I ascended the wide, old-fashioned staircase to May's room, which

was at the end of a long oak-panelled corridor. The room was open, and I saw against the pale light the moving figures of a grey-moustached inspector and of two other men in dark tweeds. At the door of the neat little room, with its bright chintzes—half sitting-room and half bed-room—I halted, and there upon the bed I saw, beneath the down quilt of red satin, the outline of someone lying there motionless, in a crouching position. The face had been tenderly covered by the sheet; but when, a moment later, I lifted it, the awful sight held me aghast, for the features were black and swollen almost out of recognition, while around the delicate neck, cutting deeply into the swollen flesh, was a pale pink silken cord, about the size of a lead pencil, which had apparently been slipped beneath the head while she slept, and the running knot drawn tight by some cowardly, murderous hand.

So swiftly had the deed been accomplished that the poor girl had evidently died without being able to utter a sound.

Her father, bent, white-faced, and broken, greeted us with a nod but without speaking, while to the police we explained in hushed

voices that we were friends of the family, and prepared to assist. The men were making careful and methodical scrutiny of the chamber of the dead, ascertaining whether any attempt had been made to open her writing-table or any of the drawers.

The maid Mason was called—a dark-haired woman, about thirty-five—and closely questioned by Superintendent Blackman, for such the man whom I had believed to be an inspector turned out to be. She said that she had been in the service of the Wentworths for eighteen years.

"It was about half-past six, sir, when, as usual, I rapped at Miss May's door," she explained. "But there was no response. She was often asleep when I came up with the tea. This morning, finding the door unlocked, I went in, put the tray on the table over there, and drew up the blinds. Then I turned, took the tray to the bedside, and was about to wake her, when I was horrified to see her curled up and black in the face, with that cord around her neck. I dashed out of the room and raised the alarm. But when we came in again we found she was stone dead. We called Dr. Jepson, from Brackley, at once, and he said that she'd

been dead about four or five hours. He only just went away as you arrived."

"And has nothing here been touched?"

"No, sir. The doctor told us not to move anything till you came."

"Quite right. But this cord?" asked the superintendent of police.

"It belonged to a dressing-gown she very often used to wear. Here it is." And Mason took the garment down from a hook behind the door, only a few feet from the bed. "You see, the cord ran through these three loops, and could be drawn out instantly."

One of the detectives, carefully turning down the sheet and revealing the ghastly face again, examined the knot, and afterwards declared:

"It was made by someone who's practised the trick. Such a knot as that isn't made on the spur of the moment!"—an opinion in which his companion entirely agreed.

"Just look round the room and see if you notice any disorder—any of the locks tampered with, or any of the drawers upset, will you?" asked the superintendent of the maid. "I suppose it's your duty to keep this place in order?"

"Yes, sir. But I've already looked round, and, as far as I can see, nothing has been touched."

"Your young mistress never locked her door?"

"She used usually to do so. But the lock seems to have gone wrong; it won't lock—I've tried it."

"Better take the lock off, Knight," he said to the younger of his men. "See if it's been tampered with."

At that moment I felt a light touch upon my shoulder, and turning, found it to be Dora Hallett, who whispered:

"Would you come downstairs a moment, Mr. Markham? I have something to say to you."

At once I acquiesced, and when we were again alone in the study, she said:

"There is yet something more terrible to tell you. I hardly know how to break it to you, but the truth has to come out."

"Tell me," I cried eagerly. "What is it?"

"Paolina is missing."

I stood staring at her like a man in a dream.

"Paolina missing!" I gasped in a hoarse

whisper. "But surely—surely she is not suspected of the crime? She has not killed the woman who has been her greatest friend!"

The handsome, dark-haired girl before me shrugged her well-formed shoulders.

"We know nothing," she said. "It is all a profound mystery. When Mason shrieked out, we all got up, but supposed that Paolina remained in her room. I ran along there to alarm her, and discovered the door locked. We battered on it, but there was no answer. Then the mystery being thus increased, we got Harding, the gardener, to force the door, when, to our utter surprise, we found the room empty. Her bed had not been slept in, and it seemed as though the door had been locked on the outside and the key taken. Poor Walter! I wonder what he will say when he knows," she added.

Scarcely had she uttered these words when my friend dashed wildly into the room, crying:

"Paolina's gone! They say that she has fled, George! They—they suspect her of the crime! It's a foul lie—an outrageous insult! We must find her—she must face them! This is abominable!"

"My dear fellow, calm yourself," I cried, placing my hand firmly upon his shoulder. "Paolina is not here, but she is probably absent with quite an innocent motive. She may return at any moment. Why upset yourself?"

I spoke as kindly as I could, but my heart was frozen within me. I remembered May's amazing confession that Fred Ingram had been her lover, and that Paolina had been her rival. Had the two women discovered each other's identity?

"Upset myself!" he cried. "Wouldn't you upset yourself if the woman you loved were accused of murder? The police have openly—actually before me—declared their suspicions of her, and Blackman has given orders for a hue-and-cry to be raised after her. They will arrest her on suspicion!"

"And if they do, she will have a perfect answer to their charge. Therefore, why act in this wild manner? Rather remain quiet and assist the police."

"Blackman has already taken that snapshot photograph of Paolina which was on May's writing-table. It is the picture I took myself when she was playing tennis at Tansor. Think of the irony of Fate!

She, the woman I love so dearly, will be identified by that photograph that I myself printed!" And we saw by his clasped hands and pale drawn features that the poor fellow was beside himself with grief and indignation.

The blow I feared had fallen.

"But, Mr. Guilford, because Paolina is absent, the police naturally suspect her," Dora remarked in a kind sympathetic voice in order to calm him. "They are bound to feign wisdom, you know. These country detectives are all alike. For my own part I expect Paolina to return presently quite ignorant of the awful affair."

"But they have been to her room, and they say that, because the latch of her window is unfastened, after killing May she entered her room, locked the door, and escaped from her window on to those leads which lead along to the coach-house. You see," he added, "they have, within their own minds, already reconstructed the whole scene."

The men at that moment passed the door on their way to examine all the locks and windows of the cold, cheerless house, wherein no fire had yet been lighted.

As far as the servants could remember, no door or window was found unfastened. Blackman was having them in the dining-room one by one and cross-questioning them very fully upon every point. The locking and unlocking of the front of the house was in the charge of Mason, who was most positive that she found neither window nor door undone; while the cook, who was responsible for the back, was equally certain.

The careful examination took over an hour, but not a single trace was found of any lock or window having been forced. There was no sign of anyone having broken into the place, and this, of course, gave further colour to the theory regarding the fugitive which the police had formed.

She was a foreigner—a fact in itself sufficient to prejudice the average English policeman. Blackman, however, was a well-known and highly experienced officer—perhaps the shrewdest in the Midland counties, and personally I had the greatest faith in his intelligence.

I contrived to have a brief chat with him alone, while he was examining the drawing-

room windows, and he then told me in confidence of his firmly fixed theory that the crime was the result of a woman's quarrel—through jealousy, most probably.

"Does it not strike you as strange, Mr. Markham, that this foreign lady should so suddenly disappear?" he asked suspiciously.

"No; because she is engaged to my friend Mr. Guilford, and was to be married shortly."

"Ah! But was there any question of jealousy, do you think?" he inquired, looking at me sharply with his keen eyes. "Mr. Guilford, I believe, is a wealthy man and heir to Lord Towcester, is he not?"

"Yes; but I am quite certain she was not jealous of poor May. Being Walter's most intimate friend, I have had opportunities of watching them both closely."

"Or—well, such a thing is quite likely," he hazarded, "poor Miss Wentworth might have been in possession of some secret of which the foreign lady feared exposure. That, you know, would be a sufficient motive."

My lips pressed themselves together, and I did not reply. What, indeed, could I say?

Was it possible that this theory was the correct one? I reflected upon what I had recently learnt from the lips of the poor girl now dead, and every word seemed to confirm the ghastly conjecture.

CHAPTER X.

EXPLAINS CERTAIN FACTS.

THE mystery was staggering.

I was standing discussing it with Dora, who had led me into the drawing-room while the police examined the windows of the study. The old apartment, chilly and fireless, seemed dull and dismal in the grey wintry morning. Its antique furniture seemed grim and out-of-date, and the old Worcester punch-bowls of pot-pourri emitted a pungent odour with the dampness of the atmosphere. Everyone conversed in whispers, for the awe of death had settled upon that usually bright and happy household.

"Look, Mr. Markham!" exclaimed the superintendent as he entered, bearing in his hand the lock of poor May's bedroom door. "See this?" And he held between his fingers a small piece of twisted brass. "Who ever committed the crime premeditated it

and inserted into the keyhole this brass paper-fastener, which, being pliable, was forced by the key into the wards of the lock, and of course rendered it useless. You see, it's just an ordinary fastener, such as is used to pierce and hold together sheets of paper."

"There are some like it in my uncle's study," remarked Dora, examining it closely. "They are about an inch long, with round flat tops."

"Will you kindly get me one, miss?" asked the police officer; and at once Dora crossed the hall and returned with one in her hand.

Very closely he compared the two in the light, and pronounced them to be identical in make and pattern.

"The insertion of such an object into the lock shows that it was carefully thought out," he said. "A piece of hard metal would have betrayed itself, whereas this, being pliable, was forced in by the key and at once jammed the wards. It was not an object that could have got in there by chance—that's very evident." Then, turning to Mason, who had entered the room at that moment to speak to Dora, he asked:

"Have you had any children staying here on a visit of late?"

"None, sir, since Mrs. Wentworth's little nieces, from London, about nine months ago."

"The paper-fastener, therefore, could not have been placed in the keyhole by any mischievous child."

With Blackman and Dora I ascended to the room which Paolina had occupied, and which was situated in the opposite wing of the house—the portion of the place that was more modern, and where the rooms were larger. Indeed, it was a good-sized, well-furnished room, with a thick, dark-blue carpet, inlaid rosewood furniture, and a heavy brass bedstead of modern make.

Mason, who followed us, pointed out that the missing lady had taken nothing with her save her pale blue motor-cap and a long drab box-cloth coat, which she usually wore for travelling. The maid found the keys, and from drawer to drawer we went, finding everything folded and in perfect order, for, as Mason declared:

"The young lady was very methodical."

Upon her toilet-table was the magnificent service in silver which Walter had given her as a birthday present two months before,

and the wardrobe where her dresses hung, on being opened, emitted that sweet odour of the expensive Parisian perfume of which she had always been so fond, and the breath of which upon the chiffons of any woman always aroused within me memories of those well-remembered days in Florence prior to the mystery of the Piazza.

About the room were numberless traces of her occupation. Upon the little writing-table lay a copy of that gossiping newspaper the *Fieramosca*, of which she was a daily reader, having it sent to her each day from an agent in London, while upon the dressing-table, in a tiny specimen-glass, was a small white chrysanthemum in water.

No one who saw it ever guessed that it was a flower that I had picked and given her in the garden on her last visit to Calcot. We had been alone, and when I had given it to her she had placed it in the button-hole of her jacket with a smile. And, it seemed, she had preserved it there as a gift from me.

Walter was with the squire downstairs, but Blackman took me to the window and, opening it, showed me how easy it would be to escape from the house by getting out

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upon the leads, and thence across to the coach-house and stables, descending by a wooden stairway that led from the hay-loft to the yard. Indeed, he got out himself and walked along, showing me that a woman would experience no difficulty in reaching the ground across the long range of stabling.

While he was crossing the roof, Walter entered the room and stood beside me.

"Well," he exclaimed bitterly, "they are still forming their theories—still condemning her—eh?"

"No, my dear fellow. They cannot condemn her until they establish her guilt."

"Her guilt!" he cried, turning upon me fiercely. "Then you, too, believe that she has done this fiend's work?"

"Certainly not. What reason have we to suspect her, except that she is absent? But she may be away upon a perfectly legitimate errand."

"I'm sure she is," declared the infatuated lover, without reasoning how curious it was that her bed should not have been slept in that night. "Miss Hallett believes she'll return presently, and so do I."

He was a shrewd man of the world in

everything except in his love. Like most other men, he was fascinated, and therefore blinded, by Paolina's remarkable beauty. Her dainty Italian mannerisms and soft speeches held him enchanted, and he could therefore think no ill of her.

He laughed between his teeth as he stood watching the police officer carefully examining the coach-house roof to find in the soft, wet moss and lichens any heel-marks.

We saw Blackman bending low and shading a circular patch of green-brown moss with his hand, and then another and another, until presently he called up one of his assistants by name—the man who had opened the lock—and pointed out what were evident traces of someone having made an exit from the house by that route.

"Fools!" cried Guilford aloud, as he turned on his heel. "It's no woman's work this. Their own commonsense ought to tell them so!" And he left the room.

As Blackman came in at the window and rejoined me, he said:

"Someone has been across there in the night, but the marks are unfortunately very indistinct. All I can make out is that it was someone wearing light shoes. There is

no mark of a heel, or we might be able to fit it to one of the Italian lady's shoes. Nevertheless, I'd like to try the toe." And selecting a well-worn little shoe with a steel buckle from a row beneath the toilet-table, he returned, and was for some time engaged in fitting the toe to the marks he had discovered. Of course, anyone stealing across a flat roof noiselessly would tread only on the toes; and, watching the officer's movements carefully, I presently detected that he had satisfied himself that his theory that Paolina had made her exit there was the correct one.

When he returned to the room he said:

"Just as I believed! The toe fits exactly. The person who got out there was a woman, and she wore very small thin-soled shoes, just as these are. She evidently scaled the small iron gate that leads into the flower-garden, and then let herself out by the green gate in the wall at the bottom, which my men tell me closes with a catch, and so out into the paddock and away."

"Then what do you intend doing?" I asked in breathless anxiety.

"We intend to find her. A foreigner can't get very far away without betraying

herself. She's no doubt been seen and noticed at some railway station in the neighbourhood. I saw the lady once in Northampton; she was selling flowers at a charity bazaar. She's very good-looking, and by her walk you'd know she's a foreigner a mile off. Englishwomen can't walk like that."

"Then you think you'll be able to find her if she really has fled?"

"I don't think—I'm sure," was his confident reply. "She may, of course, have gone out with quite an innocent motive, but for my own part I don't think so."

"You strongly suspect her—eh?"

"Yes, I do. The whole case points to a woman's jealousy, or to her fear of the revelation of some secret. She was very friendly with Miss Wentworth, and yet at the time was merely awaiting her opportunity. At least, that's my own idea. Perhaps," he added, "we shall have some further evidence at the inquest. At present, however, we must do our utmost to find the fugitive. Poor Mr. Guilford! I'm sorry for him. He seems to have been very fond indeed of her."

"Yes," I sighed; "he is."

And then the officer went downstairs, leaving me alone with Dora.

At that moment my eyes fell upon that small white chrysanthemum which Paolina had so carefully preserved, and the sight of it aroused within me a sudden and terrible apprehension. If she were in the habit of preserving such gifts, might she not have hidden there among her private belongings old letters or other things of mine? Her big American trunk standing in the corner would be searched by the police in order to discover any clue to her hiding-place, and if any letters of mine were discovered, what explanation could I give?

How could I face Walter Guilford if he knew that we had mutually practised upon him, and upon the Wentworths, a deception which was unpardonable?

By some strange, inexplicable intuition, I felt that within that trunk was some tangible evidence of our past association—evidence which I ought at all hazards to secure. My secret was in jeopardy. Poor May was the only person who had been aware of it, and, strangely enough, she had been done to death by a ruthless, unknown hand.

By whom? Ah! that was the question

to which I dare not give answer from the bottom of my heart.

I gazed upon the pure white flower in the thin-stemmed glass, that simple object which everyone passed unnoticed, and wondered whether it could have been preserved there by the hand of a murderess. And yet, when I recollected those words of the great Italian detective, I held my breath in dark suspicion.

Were there, locked within her trunk, evidences of that pure, passionate affection that had existed between us in those long-past days? I remembered that I had written her letters—some of them the outpourings of an overbursting heart. Had she preserved any of them?

None were found in her apartment in Florence when Zoli and his men had searched it after the mysterious affair in the Piazza. Therefore she had probably taken them with her in her flight; she might have still preserved them, as women sometimes do, in memory of a dead but unforgotten past.

I saw that, at all risks, I must, by some means, search the trunk and secure anything that might compromise me in the eyes of the police or of my friends.

Yet how could I search there, under their very noses? No. It was utterly impossible. Now that the police had decided to search for her, their first step would be to examine her belongings, and see if she were in correspondence with any friends who would conceal her.

My friend, Zoli, had taught me police methods long ago, and they are very much the same on the Continent as in England.

Dora was speaking to me, but I only answered mechanically, for I was wondering how I could gain time to make a secret search of that brown compressed-cane trunk.

I noticed the bunch of keys in the lock of a chest of drawers on the opposite side of the room, and a moment later, when Dora turned to speak to one of the maids approaching along the corridor, I managed to secure them and place them in my pocket.

How I longed for ten minutes alone in that room!

Presently I descended the stairs with her, being met by Walter, who stood pale and rigid, with his countenance utterly changed.

"Ah, Mr. Markham! My poor girl!" cried the old squire, brokenly, as he came

forth from the dining-room. "This is terrible—terrible! The police suspect Paolina, and yet I can't bring myself to believe that she could commit such a terrible crime. May and she were such firm friends."

"I agree with you entirely," was my quick comment. "Paolina is innocent—I'm quite sure she is."

Then, after a few minutes, I managed to slip away from them, and watch the further investigations of the detectives who had assembled in the big, old-fashioned kitchen, where there seemed to have arisen some doubt regarding a window having been left unfastened overnight.

Ten minutes later my chance came. The risk was great, but not greater than to allow the trunk to remain unexamined. If I were discovered I could, at least, excuse myself on the ground of assisting the police in their search.

Everyone was downstairs; therefore I slipped through the hall, up the servants' staircase, along the corridor, and into Paolina's room. In a few moments I had fitted the key, and, opening the trunk, knelt beside it.

What secrets might it not contain?

Or had she, prior to her flight, taken out all her most prized possessions ?

At first there were only a couple of silk evening dresses, and a muslin ball-dress of pale blue, a rich sable cape, and then a couple of cheap black stuff gowns, most probably of the days when she had acted as a waitress in New York, or as milliner's assistant in Chicago. I found, indeed, a neat white cap, such as is worn by waitresses, together with several Swiss embroidered aprons, carefully folded. All these I turned out hurriedly upon the floor, together with pieces of lace, rolls of ribbon, and other feminine trifles, such as encumber every woman's box. Some of the things were evidently cherished souvenirs of long ago, but I tossed them all out, until at last I came to a small square trinket-box of olive wood, closed by a catch, which on opening I found full of letters, all carefully preserved.

A single glance at the handwriting showed me that they were actually my own—twenty or thirty of them ! In an instant I took them out with trembling fingers and placed them in my breast-pocket.

I heard someone ascending the stairs,

but so eager was I to complete my search that I made no attempt to conceal my actions. The footsteps, however, died away. In the bottom of the trunk I found another packet of letters, which I also secured, together with a small writing-portfolio, evidently out of her dressing-bag, for within the flap I saw that one letter only, on blue paper, had been preserved.

I seized it, and crushed it into the side-pocket of my jacket. Then, satisfying myself that I had secured everything that might be worth attention, I tossed the dresses back into the box in quick, breathless haste, locked it, and flung the keys upon the dressing-table, just at the moment when I heard Walter calling me.

The letter from the writing-case I took out in order to transfer to my inner pocket with the others, and in doing so glanced at the sprawling signature, which I made out to be "Robert Alderson."

A letter written to her by Bob! What could it contain?

But I was afforded no time at that moment to satisfy my curiosity, for Walter burst wildly into the room, and I had only

a single instant in which to conceal from him my amazing discovery.

That letter was, I felt certain, one which, hidden in the flap of the writing-case, she had overlooked and forgotten.

CHAPTER XI.

FORESHADOWS A DANGER.

My swift decision had saved me.

At the head of the old oak staircase I met Blackman ascending, and as he passed me he said :

"We must search the belongings of the missing lady. They may tell us something." And, thus invited by him, I returned again to the room and assisted him to overhaul the trunk that only a few minutes before I had opened.

In every cupboard and in every drawer we searched, but discovered nothing that gave any clue to Paolina's past. All was, fortunately, safely within my own pocket.

"She either destroyed everything or has taken them with her," remarked the police superintendent. "Women always keep letters."

Then, a quarter of an hour later, when I managed to be alone in the little spare

room, which Mrs. Wentworth and her daughter used as a work-room, I took out the letter from the writing-case and eagerly glanced at it.

Written in pencil as though hurriedly, and undated, it said :

" DEAR PAOLINA,

" I send you this in great haste. W. suspects—therefore be careful ! I am ready to keep the appointment at any day or hour you name. You may trust the bearer implicitly. May evidently intends to tell everything ! George must know nothing. I shall be ready.—Yours,

" ROBERT ALDERSON."

What construction was I to place upon such a secret communication ? Broadly, there was but one—namely, that Bob had assisted her. But in what ?

Walter suspected, he warned her. What, however, did Walter suspect ? He had never told me of any suspicion. On the other hand, he had always been far too prone to accept her at her own estimate. Bob had a secret appointment with her, and declared his anxiety to serve her interests. But the

most important passage of all was the declaration of May's intention to betray her.

Was that knowledge sufficient incentive for the terrible deed? The very suggestion held me breathless.

With my own lips I had confessed to May—I had revealed to her the secret of my love for Paolina, believing in her promise to regard it as a confidence. Yet it seemed, from Alderson's warning, that she had resolved to reveal the past to Walter. It seemed almost as though he had actually urged and aided Paolina to silence her friend!

And yet, after all, there was nothing scandalous in our previous acquaintanceship. We had loved, it was true, with a deep and intense passion such as, alas! comes to few hearts, and the only point at issue was that I had concealed the truth from the man who was my friend.

In this, I contend, I had done right. If a man is a real man he should be loyal to a woman, especially if the latter is striving after happiness. I disregarded entirely what Zoli had alleged, and those days of her brilliant life in Florence I put aside as forgotten. Paolina was to me the sweet, dark-

eyed love of my youth, and for the sake of the tender affection I had once borne her, I had remained silent and had met her as a stranger.

The revelation that she was in secret alliance with the man who, strangely enough, I had often believed held her in some suspicion was to me a most startling revelation.

He had been absent that night—was still absent, indeed—in London. After returning from hunting on the Saturday he had changed and driven to the station, saying that he had to dine with some people at the Carlton, and go to the play afterwards. I now remembered that he had only made the announcement after his return home, for we had ridden together back from Easton-on-the-Hill, and on the way he had expressed his intention of going to Laxton Hall—the squire of which place always gave us a warm welcome, and whose excellent sloe gin I had often tasted. Therefore, on his return, before dressing he might have received some message from Radstone. In his letter to her he declared that he held himself prepared to act as she directed. Was my theory, I wondered, the correct one? Had he actually aided her to escape?

The whole thing was an absolute and inscrutable mystery, for while, on the one hand, it seemed that Paolina and Bob were in secret association, yet I could not conceive that poor May's life had actually been taken solely in order to preserve the simple secret that we had loved. No. I felt convinced that there was some far stronger and deeper motive, but what it was I could not even surmise. The tragedy was a complete enigma.

The suspicion grew within me, however, that Bob Alderson had either knowingly or unwittingly assisted her to escape. Had she planned escape and invoked his aid? It certainly seemed as though such were the case.

I recollected with what care and cunning May had followed us to our tryst in the park beyond Brackley. I remembered, too, that strange attitude of hers when we had spoken, and how I had wondered at the time whether she were actually jealous of me. Women are uncertain in their loves and hatreds, and more than once the faint suspicion had crossed my mind that jealousy had really impelled her to follow us. If so, then my confession must have rendered her

even more bitter against Paolina, although she was clever enough not to openly exhibit it. Jealousy often arouses a double cunning within the female breast.

Was I in any way morally responsible for the tragedy? I put the question to myself as I gazed through the old mullioned window upon the green lawn outside, and I found that it was one to which I could return no direct reply.

Upon me there rested a certain responsibility. I had acted unwisely in making confession of my love—in wearing my heart upon my sleeve at that critical moment. And yet I had done so in order to save Paolina's exposure, for, jealous or not, I knew that May would have gone straight home and related to Dora what she had discovered.

In saving Paolina I had, it seemed, sacrificed May. My secret responsibility held me rigid, aghast.

The doctor returned and held a consultation with Blackman in the dead girl's room. By this time the news had spread across the country-side, and outside the closed gates of the Grange many villagers had assembled, discussing the tragic affair.

Presently, after the doctor had left, I found myself again alone with Dora in the study.

"I can't make it out where Paolina has gone," she exclaimed with a sigh.

"She left in secret, it seems, and therefore most probably does not intend to return."

"But surely she has not sacrificed everything—her love for Walter, and the position which would, in a couple of months, be hers. I can't conceive it possible!"

"There may be a reason, Miss Hallett," I remarked, in a hard voice, gazing into her fine eyes, and inwardly admiring her handsome, well-cut features.

"There must be—a strong one," was her quick reply. Then, dropping her voice to a whisper of confidence, she added: "Of all her friends here, the one the least disposed towards her is Mr. Alderson."

Mention of Bob's name aroused within me a sudden interest.

"What causes you to imagine that?" I asked.

"From his remarks," was her answer.

"One day, not long ago, he pointed out to me the folly of Walter marrying a woman

whom nobody knew, and in whose past might or might not be some hidden secret."

"Hidden secret!" I laughed, feigning to be amused. "What does he suspect?"

"I don't really know—except that he said if he were Walter he would first make inquiries in Italy before he married."

Was it really possible that Bob had learnt her secret—had, perhaps, identified her as the woman who had been wanted by the police?

I recollected the photograph which Blackman had taken, and my heart sank within me. She would, no doubt, be identified with that portrait which would appear on those posters outside the principal police-stations in the United Kingdom!

"Bob did not give you any ground for his suspicion?"

"Not in the least. It seemed to me as though he were, somehow, prejudiced against her. For my own part, however, I have always found her very well-brained, upright, and charming, and I don't believe in those dark hints he made."

"What dark hints?"

"Well, he spoke as though she had entangled Walter, merely because, by marry-

ing him, she would eventually become a countess. But, on the contrary, I am certain she is extremely fond of him."

"You have no suspicion why Bob should have so suddenly become embittered against her?"

"No. He spoke to me about three weeks ago, and expressed regret that Walter was so utterly infatuated that he would not listen to reason," was her response.

It was curious, I thought, that he should seek to arouse suspicion regarding her while at the same time he was in secret her friend.

This in itself showed that, whatever were the circumstances, he was playing her false.

I made sympathetic mention of poor May, but Dora suddenly broke into tears. She had been very devoted to her cousin, for they had spent so much time together, she at Radstone and May at Bournemouth, that a sisterly affection had sprung up between them.

To further describe that scene of grief in the hushed house of mourning can serve no purpose. Suffice it that I remained for several hours with Walter, whose indignation had now been succeeded by blank despair. He sat in a big, grandfather chair,

in a corner of the dining-room, staring straight before him, and uttering no word.

"Wire to Bob at the Sports Club. Tell him the news," he had said huskily to me, and in obedience I had walked along to the village post office and despatched a message. But instead of telling him what had occurred, I simply urged him to return to Calcot at once, prepaying a reply.

At five o'clock Marshall drove us in the motor into Brackley, and we returned home together by train. But on the journey my friend scarcely uttered a word, sitting in the corner of the carriage, his eyes fixed into space. Paolina's sudden disappearance, and the suspicion cast upon her, now held him bewildered.

On arrival at Calcot we found that Bob had not returned, neither was there any reply to my telegram.

Leaving Walter to go to wash—for we had agreed not to dress that evening—I went to my own room, and, having locked the door, proceeded to examine by the lamp-light the two packets of letters I had so fortunately secured.

The first brought a lump into my throat as my eyes fell upon them. They were my

own, and, as I saw from the envelopes, had been written to her from Santa Lucia, and from that dull, dingy room in Fig Tree Court. Some had not been through the post, and were those urgent notes which I remembered I used to send her by the hands of old Benvenuto, the gardener, who had so faithfully kept our secret.

One after the other I opened them. All were in Italian, and all addressed to "My adored Santina"—for Santina, or "Little Saint," was the pet name the old professor had given her when she had left the convent school and begged of him to allow her to take the veil. Everyone knew her by that name, for in the old-world villages of Tuscany everyone is given a "little name," from the lord in his castle down to the meanest contadino.

One after another I read those faded letters I had penned in the days when my life was so full of light and happiness, and each one brought a sigh to my lips and a mist to my eyes as they recalled the sweetness of our mutual affection. There were secret trysts and secret counsels, regrets at having to accompany my father hither and thither in Italy, and fond expressions

of eagerness to return to her. Then a tender note of farewell, and afterwards long letters headed "Londra"—letters which described the soul-killing dulness of the Temple, the gyves of which bound me so far apart from her.

And as I read I lived those days over again, those early days in London when, although English, I knew nothing of England or English ways, and when, after the sunshine above the Arno, where the caps of the far-off purple mountains were tipped with snow, and where the brown-faced peasants sang the old musical *stornelli* at their work, London, with its roar and bustle and winter fogs, was so dismal and dispiriting.

She had kept those letters of mine as a souvenir of our affection—she who was now denounced as an adventuress—nay, as a murderess!

I confess to you that tears sprang to my eyes, and I re-tied the little packet with my jaws set hard. In those moments I had lived again in the past, and with chagrin realised what happiness had been denied to me.

The second packet was a miscellaneous collection—missives penned by various

hands, the envelopes bearing various stamps. Some were in the neat, classical hand of the old professor, a handwriting I knew so well, kindly, affectionate letters from father to daughter, beginning "*Mia cara figlia.*"

One or two of them were mere formal communications from her solicitors in Florence regarding her father's affairs after his death; but there were others, enclosed by themselves in a larger envelope, written in English, of a late date, and bearing the embossed heading, "Piazza Vittorio Emanuele, Florence."

They constituted her secret correspondence with Fred Ingram, the young Englishman whose tragic end was as mysterious as that of poor May Wentworth.

I held them in my trembling fingers, gazing at them beneath the lamp.

What secrets might they not contain?

CHAPTER XII.

WHICH IS MORE MYSTIFYING.

FROM the first letter I opened, I saw how the man, now dead, had addressed her. Then I recollected how I had given her my promise not to prejudge her, and realised that, although my action in securing those letters was justified, yet they were hers, and I had no right to read them.

Her association with poor Fred—even though Zoli had made that direct and terrible accusation—was not my affair. To me she had asserted her innocence—had declared it upon that which she, as a Catholic, held most sacred, the repose of her dead mother's soul. And I had given her my promise. Was it, therefore, the act of a man to pry into that correspondence penned by a man now dead, and for her eyes alone?

The temptation to open those letters and read them was, indeed, a very sore one. I longed to learn the secret of the soft-eyed



"I STOOD STAMING AT THEM IN INDECISION"

woman whose memory was still the sweetest I possessed, and yet whose present position was most suspicious and perilous.

In that moment I struggled with myself, endeavouring to find excuse for examining that secret correspondence. Yet I found none, except the one of sheer curiosity. I had accepted her own declaration of innocence, therefore a knowledge of what was written there could only prejudice me against her. And was that right—was it really just? I had stolen those letters in order to render *her* a service—in order to hinder the police in their search. Therefore it was my duty to allow them to remain—to allow the closed page of her life's history to remain unopened.

When curiosity prompts an action is often irresistible, even against one's better nature. She *had* fled, it was true; but I argued that knowledge of what was within there could in no manner assist me to a knowledge of the truth regarding the tragedy at Radstone.

I replaced the letters upon the table beneath the big, yellow-shaded lamp, and stood staring at them in indecision.

Should I read them, and thus ascertain

the true nature of her association with the man whose death had been attributed by the police to her? Or should I stay my hand, and remain in ignorance?

Yes; even though the world denounce her, I would keep faith with her.

I took up the little pile, and cast the letters into the fire which the maids lit each evening in my room. For a moment the flames licked them, but as I watched, the long, bright tongues of fire suddenly shot upwards, and a few seconds later all that remained of the dead man's letters was a handful of black, crackling tinder.

I was a fool, I hear you say. But I contend that I acted as a man should act.

God alone orders the events of this world, and I knew not what was in store for me. Had I known I should perhaps have acted differently.

That night I sat at table with Walter in silence. Anderson, who knew the severe blow his master had sustained by Paolina's disappearance, waited upon us noiselessly, his thin, shaven face as grave as our own. My host scarcely ate anything, and when I followed him to the smoking-room he turned to me suddenly, and said, petulantly:

"I can't remain here inactive, George. We must set out to find her."

"I'll do my very best to assist you," I said. "How do you propose to act?"

He shook his head.

"If she had friends in London, I should propose to search for her there. But, to my knowledge, she knows not a soul. And yet, after all," he added, "if she wished to hide herself she'd surely go to London."

I recollected that Alderson was in London, and felt confident that she was there also. That she had money I was well aware, for Walter had opened a small account for her in order that she might not feel so dependent upon his charity. Once he had told me that she had spent hardly any of the money he had placed to her credit.

There must have been a motive, and a very strong one, to induce her to leave everything behind—even her most treasured possessions—and fly from the Grange like a thief. The motive was fear. Of what?

That was the question which puzzled us.

We discussed the most judicious course of action for over an hour, while he paced the room anxiously, first lighting a cigar and then tossing it into the grate after a

few whiffs. His whole manner had changed, and from the merry, easy-going sportsman and man of the world, he was now pale, nervous, and agitated, with haggard features, and bright, fevered eyes.

"Strange that Bob hasn't replied," he remarked. "He always looks in at the Sports in the afternoon. I've half a mind to catch the ten-twenty to town and see him."

"Much better remain here," I urged. "What good can you do up there? Bob will be back in the morning. Besides, it is from Radstone we ought to trace Paolina."

"The police—curse their suspicion and inquisitiveness!—will no doubt do that."

"She may have already returned," I said, with an effort to reassure him.

"If she had they would have wired to me," he answered, shaking his head.

"But have you any idea of any friend to whom she would have gone?" I asked.

"Try and think."

"I have thought. There is none."

His one anxiety was to go to London, but I dissuaded him from doing so, urging him to wait until the morrow.

The dawn brought no tidings of either Bob or of Paolina, yet the absence of both never once occurred to Walter as a curious coincidence.

Together we motored over to Radstone at noon, and found the house with drawn blinds in silence and mourning. Dora, who seemed to have assumed the responsibilities of the household, took us into the drawing-room and chatted with us for a long time, but it seemed that the affair remained just as much of a mystery as ever.

On the previous evening, it appeared, a detective, who had specially come down from London, had called with the local superintendent of police, and made many inquiries of Mr. Wentworth regarding Paolina and her antecedents. As to the latter, of course, the squire could give no information, except those vague details of her past which she had from time to time given to the Wentworths.

It was evident that the Northamptonshire constabulary had already sought the aid of Scotland Yard, and my chief fear now was that the photograph of her, taken by Walter and carried away by Blackman, should be identified with that supplied to

the English police by the Italian Department of Public Security.

On the following day the inquest was held at the Wentworth Arms, the little old-fashioned thatched inn half-way up the village street, and the interest in the mysterious affair culminated when the coroner from Northampton took his seat, and the village constable, as coroner's officer, swore in twelve villagers as jurymen. Both Walter and I were present in the upstairs parlour where the inquiry was held. The room was packed to suffocation, but the witnesses were few; the squire, who identified the body of his daughter, the maid Mason who discovered her, Dora who last saw her alive—having sat in her room talking to her until close upon midnight—the police superintendent, and the doctor.

The coroner made no comment whatever upon the case, much, of course, to the disappointment of the curious. He merely expressed his deep sympathy with Mr. and Mrs. Wentworth, and suggested to the jury that an adjournment might be made for a fortnight, in order to allow the police to make inquiries.

No word was mentioned of Paolina, yet

her protracted absence increased the suspicion against her. And when we returned to Calcot there was still no word from Bob. The latter was, however, always erratic in his movements, therefore his continued absence was in no way unusual. From London he often ran down to his mother's place near Shrewsbury; therefore we had that day telegraphed there, and a reply was awaiting us from Mrs. Alderson to the effect that she had not seen her son.

That night I remained up writing letters for half an hour or so after Walter had gone to his room, when his man entered the study to inquire if I wanted anything more.

"Here's a letter for Mr. Alderson, sir. It's been here several days. Shall I send it on to the Sports Club, do you think?"

I took it from him, and, glancing at the address, saw that it was in Bob's own hand.

"I'll send it to him," I answered as casually as I could, and then, when the man had wished me good-night and closed the door, I examined the envelope beneath the light, finding that it bore the postmark of Wendlebury, which, on turning to the "Atlas of the Counties of England" which

I took from the bookcase, I found was a village on the high-road between Bicester and Oxford. The stamps upon it were two halfpenny ones, and the date the previous Friday. As it was apparently a business reply, the price of a horse or something of that sort, I placed it aside on the table, and continued my letter.

At my elbow was a whiskey and soda, the usual bachelor night-cap which Anderson had placed there for me before retiring, and as I wrote on, no sound broke the quiet save the slow, solemn tick of the old grandfather's clock out in the hall.

I suppose I must have written for another half-hour, for I had a number of instructions to give my manager in Italy, when, of a sudden, in reaching for another sheet of paper from the rack, my elbow caught the glass and overturned it upon the blotting-pad, saturating the writing-table and everything upon it.

In an instant I took my handkerchief and mopped up as much as I could, fearing that the green cloth of the table would be spoilt, and then removed the two or three papers that had become soddened, including the letter which Anderson had given me.

One after the other I wiped the papers, taking up the letter and passing my wet handkerchief across the face of the envelope, when to my amazement the stamps, which had apparently been affixed only around the edges, became ungummed and wiped off, and beneath was revealed some writing!

I could scarcely believe my eyes.

The handwriting was that thin, angular caligraphy of Paolina with which I was so familiar. And the brief message, written in English in a small, neat script, was:—

"To-morrow. If we do not meet at the spot you name, then call at 161, Burton Crescent."

That was all. But it told me where she was in concealment. The revelation of that newly-discovered mode of communication caused me to hold my breath.

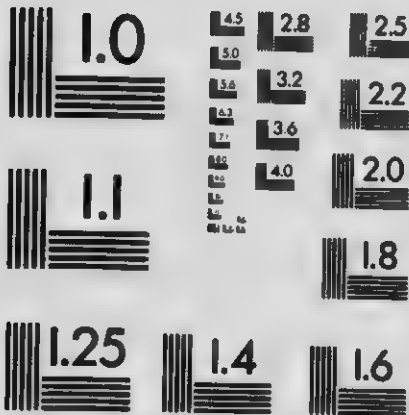
I pulled up the damp flap of the envelope, and drew out its contents. It was entirely unsuspecting, merely a bill from a well-known firm of shirt-makers in Piccadilly—"To account rendered."

The secret message had been written upon the envelope with a fine pen, and the two halfpenny stamps gummed only at the edges, so that on receipt of the letter they might



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be easily removed with a sharp penknife. The date of the letter, which she had evidently contrived to post while motoring on the road between Brackley and Oxford, was, I saw, the day prior to Bob's departure for town.

I read and re-read that message that had been so cunningly concealed. The letter had evidently arrived just after Bob had left, therefore it seemed quite feasible that he had no knowledge of the tryst. Yet if he had arranged to meet her in secret at any spot in the neighbourhood he would, of course, be in possession of that address, and at the same time be confident that, even if her letter had been opened, no one would discover the message hidden by the postage stamps.

The ingenuity of the device was simple, and yet showed the invention of an ever-active mind. More than ever I was convinced of the close association between Alderson and the fugitive.

But now that I knew where she had sought asylum, I would follow and watch; therefore, taking up her letter, I dried it before the fire, and, after placing it in my pocket-book, turned out the lamp and retired to bed.

At noon on the following day, having succeeded in inducing Walter to remain at home and go over to Radstone for news, I alighted at Euston and drove to the York Hotel, in Albemarle Street, where I deposited my bag.

Having done so, I obtained the London Directory, and searching the list of occupiers of houses in Burton Crescent I found, "Left side—161, Finali Domenico."

Finali! An Italian, evidently. She was in concealment with one of her own compatriots, who probably kept a lodging-house, for in that small oasis of green between the Euston Road and the British Museum, in the direct cab-track to the Northern termini, most of the houses let apartments.

I took a hansom, and, concealing my face in a newspaper, drove past the house in question, finding that it was a trifle more dingy and smoke-blackened than its neighbours, a typical Bloomsbury residence, with area, and a flight of steps leading to a front door, over which was a semi-circular fan-light whereon the number was painted in large white figures. There was no sign of life at the windows, before which lace curtains that had once been white hung limp,

yellow, and neglected, and the whole place had a dismal, unutterably sad aspect on that chill, damp day.

At the Sports I could gain no news of Bob. He had not been there for nearly a month, the hall-porter said; and at the Victoria, where he usually stayed, he had not been a visitor for the same period.

When, however, the short day had drawn to a close and the street lamps were lit, I put on my overcoat and drove as far as Marchmont Street, where I alighted, and, entering the Crescent, commenced a vigil opposite the house, passing and repassing in the shadow of those high railings which divided the semi-circular piece of grass from the roadway.

The blinds were down, and in the kitchen, the dining-room, and the hall the gas had been lit. But my watch was a weary one, and I think the fact that I was loitering quickly aroused the suspicion of the constable on the beat. The evening postman and the vendor of baked potatoes went their rounds; yet, hungry and cold, I remained doggedly at my post, determined to ascertain who came and went at Paolina's mysterious asylum.

The hours went past—long, weary hours, during which my feet became cold and cramped, and I sighed for a hot meal, my eagerness being such that I had not waited to dine at the hotel.

More than once I was prompted to ascend the steps and boldly inquire for the Signorina, yet I saw that by so doing I might spoil all chance of ultimate success. By patience alone should I be enabled to elucidate the mystery. Thus time after time I paced and re-paced that long strip of pavement beside the railings from the corner of Bideford Street to the short turning which I saw was called Leigh Street, my eyes ever on the alert, examining each passer-by and eagerly watchful for the front door to open.

I was ravenously hungry, having eaten little all day, yet I dare not relinquish my vigil lest she might enter or come forth; therefore I remained as the hours slowly crept on until ten o'clock had struck from a neighbouring church, and the foot-passengers became more infrequent.

Suddenly, just as I had walked as far as the corner of Euston Road and had turned back upon my heel, a man in a long, dark ulster and hard felt hat, hurrying along in

my direction, overtook me. Then, crossing the road beneath one of the street-lamps, he ascended the steps of the house I was watching, and let himself in with a latch-key.

As he passed beneath the lamp his face became fully revealed to me.

Yet so amazed was I on recognising the features that I believe I must have drawn back with an involuntary cry. I stood dumfounded.

It was not Bob Alderson, as you may suppose, but an entirely different person—a person the sight of whose countenance increased the mystery a thousandfold.

CHAPTER XIII.

RELATES A STRANGE STORY.

THE door had closed ere I had recovered from my speechless amazement. I stood stupefied by the shock that the sight of that figure in the dark overcoat had caused me, unable to fully convince myself that the face was no mere chimera of my disordered imagination.

Bewildered, aghast, I halted, gazing at the closed door which shut out from my gaze the form which had brushed past me so hurriedly. But that pale, drawn, ascetic countenance was graven upon my memory. No; I could not mistake it. And yet, was I really in my right mind? Was my mind so full of the mysterious events of the immediate past that my eyes were playing me tricks? In a crowded London thoroughfare the faces of passers-by often bear to our eyes striking resemblances to intimate friends. Have you not frequently

been startled by a countenance which, on near approach, has proved to be that of an utter stranger? To me, in common with others, the experience was not unknown, and I should probably have dismissed the encounter with a smile at my own foolishness had it not been for two striking facts. One was that the man had entered the house I was watching; and the other was that he bore upon his left temple, just above the eye, the small, dark red birth-mark that I knew so well.

Those two circumstances convinced me, and I held my breath in sheer amazement.

The affair at Radstone had been mysterious and tragic enough, yet it was as nothing in comparison with the bewildering puzzle that now presented itself to me for solution.

My first impulse as I stood on the pavement opposite the house was that which would have arisen within the mind of any man in similar circumstances—namely, to cross, knock boldly at the door, and make inquiry. Indeed, I left the railings around the sooty grass enclosure, crossed the road, and stood staring down into the narrow area.

Paolina was, no doubt, concealed within

that house. If I went there I should at once negative all chance of learning the truth.

I was watching for her. If absent, she would undoubtedly return before midnight. If at home, then she would not come forth, and my cold, weary vigil as far as she was concerned, would be in vain.

The latter it proved to be. Until midnight I lingered there, arousing the suspicion of the fresh constable who came upon the beat, and compelled to buy in a dark corner two baked potatoes in order to satisfy the pangs of hunger. But as there were no signs of her, and as no one either entered or left the house, the address of which had been so secretly conveyed beneath the postage-stamps, I at last turned and drove to Odennino's, in Regent Street, for supper prior to going on to my hotel.

I slept but little, and was up betimes. At nine I received a telegram from Walter saying that he was coming up to town to join me; therefore, not desiring his company just then, I was compelled to pay my bill and take my bag on to the "Clifton," in Welbeck Street, fearing that if I went down to the "Cecil" or either of the hotels

in Northumberland Avenue he might discover me.

At eleven I re-commenced my self-imposed task in Burton Crescent, finding that the blinds were up, although the exterior of the place was just as dull and dispiriting as heretofore. The weather had in no way improved. Indeed, during the first half-hour there fell a light, drizzling rain, which compelled me to seek shelter in a doorway at the corner nearest the Euston Road.

The fact that before the house was the railed-in semi-circular piece of grass favoured me considerably in my vigil, for I could remain on the far side of the Crescent practically out of observation from the lower windows, and yet keep watch upon the front door. I had prepared myself with flask and sandwiches, and it was fortunate that I had done so, for although I remained there the whole day, damp, cold, and fatigued—it was not before darkness had fallen that my vigilance became suddenly rewarded.

It was in that darkest half-hour when in the side streets of the London thoroughfares the lamp-lighters have not finished, and the roads remain in semi-darkness. Out

in the Euston Road the big electric lamps were already shedding their cold white glare, but in Burton Crescent the only lights were in two or three windows, or over a dingy fanlight here and there.

In the house I watched, a shabby, shuffling old woman came to the windows and lowered the dusty venetian blinds, and then, with a suddenness that was startling, the door opened, and there descended the steps, with light, springy tread, the overcoated figure of the man whom I had recognised on the previous night.

Dressed as before, he carried a small brown leather bag, and walked at a brisk pace along Marchmont Street towards Russell Square, while I started off after him, determined to follow and ascertain his destination.

Outside the Hotel "Russell" he entered a hansom, and in a similar conveyance I followed him down to Oxford Street, through Long Acre and Bow Street, and across Waterloo Bridge to the South Western Railway terminus.

On alighting he made some inquiry of the porter, and then entering the booking-office took a ticket, and afterwards sought

a seat in a second-class compartment of a train in waiting at the platform.

"What did that gentleman ask you a minute ago?" I inquired of the porter, at the same time slipping a shilling into his hand.

The man looked at me in surprise for a moment, until he felt the coin, then said:

"'E arst me if this is the Bournemouth express, and I told 'im it was."

"How long is there before it starts?" I inquired.

"Thirteen minutes, sir," the man replied.

Therefore I bought a ticket, went along to get a sandwich at the bar—for I had had no dinner—and having purchased a paper, I entered the train.

Three times had I managed to obtain a good look at his face while he had been entirely unsuspecting, and had become convinced that, although the red birth-mark was almost obliterated by some colouring, I was not mistaken.

The discovery utterly staggered me.

Alone I sat in the compartment while the express rushed through Clapham Junction and out towards the south coast, while the rain, now pouring, beat upon the windows.

And during the journey I had time to ponder. The very fact that the man with whom I was travelling only went out at night showed that he was in fear of recognition. Besides, his movements were those of a person who wished to conceal his identity. The more I reflected, the more utterly astounding and incredible did the truth appear.

At last the train ran into the station at Bournemouth, and he alighted. On following him I heard him give directions to a cabman to drive to the "Bath" Hotel—one of the best in the town. And to the same hotel I also drove five minutes later, finding it a large handsome place with a spacious lounge and garden beyond.

Having engaged a room, I remarked to the clerk, quite casually :

"A friend of mine arrived a few minutes ago. What is his number?"

"Oh, Mr. Garthorne, sir. He has one-forty-seven—on the second floor."

I made a note of the number, and followed the waiter to the room allotted to me.

After a wash and a brush-up as well as I could, not having with me any toilet things, I waited about ten minutes and then ascended to the second floor, and went

along the corridor until I found the room numbered 147.

With sudden resolve I tapped sharply, and in response a man's voice cried, "Come in!" Whereupon I opened the door, and next instant we were face to face.

On recognising me he fell back, white and haggard, as though I had struck him a blow; then, recovering himself, he gasped:

"George! Is it—is it really you?"

"It is I who surely ought to ask that question," I cried, closing the door behind me and advancing towards him. "I, who ought to ask whether you are really living flesh and blood—whether you are actually Fred Ingram?"

"I was known as Fred Ingram," was his reply, in a hard, strained voice. "But Fred Ingram no longer exists. He died, and was buried in Florence four years ago."

I asked, "But why Harry Garthorne now?"

"For reasons known only to myself, George," he responded briefly.

"But you died—you were found dead in your rooms in the Piazza!" I cried.

"You did not find me—did you? I was buried before you returned from Paris."

"True. I never saw you after the tragedy," I admitted.

"Well," he exclaimed, "the matter is quite simple. They did not kill me, but somebody else. I was away in Venice, and read in the paper of my own death, so I allowed the world to believe that I had been assassinated, and commenced a new life under another name. It has been a strange experience, I can assure you. But tell me, George," he asked, putting forth his hand and taking mine firmly, "tell me how you have fared, and how you knew of my continued existence."

"I met you accidentally in Burton Crescent," I answered, and I noticed that his jaw dropped at mention of the thoroughfare.

"Only fancy!" he laughed uneasily. "Well, it was really my intention to go back to Italy this winter and call upon you. I wanted to see what shock my reappearance in the flesh would cause you."

"But everyone believes that you were assassinated," I said bewildered, and yet still somewhat suspicious of him. "Even Zoli, the great detective, believes that you are dead."

"A man did die," he answered. "But, fortunately, it was not myself."

"How did they identify him as you?" I asked eagerly.

"You know the absurd police regulations in Italy, which do not allow friends to view the body of a person assassinated. Well, they found the mysterious fellow murdered in my room, and naturally jumped to the conclusion that he was the Signor Ingram who occupied the flat. It was towards the end of the season; most of my intimate friends had left Florence for the summer, so apparently nobody pressed to be allowed to see me, while the servants were, of course, prevented. No question whatever arose but that the dead man was the English signore; hence, without seeking the extraordinary situation, I found myself declared to be assassinated and buried."

"But has the mistake never been rectified? Have the police never discovered that the body was buried unidentified?" I asked, astounded at his amazing story.

Here was a man before me—an intimate friend, whose loss I, with others, had mourned for the past four years! And he was alive and well!

"The police have never troubled about it, I suppose, and the Consulate registered the death. The assassins stole certain important papers of mine, but very fortunately destroyed them."

"Why fortunately?"

"Well," he said, laughing bitterly, "among them were certain papers in English which I had no desire should be made public. Evidently, however, the person who burned them couldn't read English—which was very fortunate for me. But sit down here, and let us talk. Well—only fancy your following me here from London! Have a cigar? They're not very good, but the best I can afford nowadays."

And the man so long dead offered me his gold cigar-case, with which in years gone past I had been so familiar. Upon it was engraved the stag rampant, the arms of the Ingrams of Chetmale, but within were cigars of a cheaper brand than those which he had habitually smoked in those well-remembered days before his "death."

"Well," I said, lighting up and sinking into the big armchair at the foot of the bed, while he threw himself upon the couch and also lit a weed, "I think, Fred, this meeting

is the strangest that could ever happen between two men. In books one reads of people being presumed to be dead, and of others who pretend to commit suicide, and all that kind of thing; but it seems that, through the hide-bound stupidity of the police themselves, you suddenly awoke one morning to find yourself non-existent."

"That's exactly the case," he said. "All my money went to my brother, and I became what I am now—an actor with a provincial touring company under the name of Henry Garthorne."

"Your brother has inherited your estate, then?" I exclaimed. "Haven't you carried this masquerade a bit too far?"

"Ah!" he sighed. "How could I die and yet be in possession of Chetmale? No; I saw from that very morning when I opened the *Tribuna* at the café in the Piazza San Marco, and to my amazement read of my own tragic end, that to secure sufficient income to live upon was impossible. At imminent risk of being detected, I took out a cheque there and then, and drew four thousand pounds from the bank—the largest sum I dared. And from that moment I became Harry Garthorne, actor."

"But, my dear old fellow, why have you done this? Why have you allowed me and all your other friends to believe that you were the victim of an assassin?"

He was silent for some moments, watching the smoke slowly ascending from his cigar, as though debating within himself whether he should reveal to me the truth.

"Well," he said at length in a changed, serious voice, "because, George—well, because I had a motive—I had an end in view."

"What do you mean? I don't follow you."

"It was imperative—it was either that—or suicide!" he explained, in a strained half-whisper. "The tragedy—terrible though it was—saved me from death—and worse—from shame!"

CHAPTER XIV.

REVEALS A MAN'S SHAME.

I SAT staring straight at him for a long time without uttering a word.

What shame did he fear? I wondered.

Presently I pressed him to be more explicit, but he only shook his head and sighed gravely. It was his own secret, he said—a secret he intended to keep.

"But were you aware of who the man was who was discovered dead in your room?"

"No; not in the least," was his quick response. "How could I return to Florence and inquire without revealing my existence?"

"There was, I presume, a conspiracy to kill you?"

"Without a doubt."

"Do you recollect two Frenchmen named Vernet and Martin?" I asked.

"Of course. Martin was a friend of Paulina. Vernet I met at the Hôtel National

at Lucerne. I had my suspicions about the pair. I believe they were adventurers."

"Without a doubt," I said. "Shortly after the mysterious affair in the Piazza they were arrested for fraud. Vernet, who was chief of an international gang of thieves, and known as 'The Spider's Eye,' died in prison." I was about to reveal the confession he had made regarding Paolina, but fortunately was able to cut short the sentence.

"Ah! As I thought!" he said, staring straight before him. "Paolina was far too prone to allow strangers to make her acquaintance. I often warned her against it, but she used to laugh, and declare that they amused her."

I did not respond for quite a long time. I longed to learn from him a truth which for years had puzzled me, and I wondered whether in that first hour of our meeting he would tell me the true facts. Should I ask him straight out? He was still my friend. Yes; I would do so.

I smoked on, pondering upon the least clumsy way in which to put my question. At last I looked straight into his thin, refined, clean-shaven face with its pair of

dark eyes that seemed to burn like glowing coals as they turned upon me, and, after a moment's hesitation, said :

" You have mentioned Paolina, Fred. Now that we have met again in these remarkable circumstances, and now that I have exhumed you from the grave in which you were supposed to be, I want to ask you a question—a very serious question."

" Well ? " he asked, removing his cigar from his lips and stirring himself slightly in his seat as he faced me. " What is it ? "

" I want to ask you whether, in those days in Florence, prior to the extraordinary affair which put an end to your existence, you really loved Paolina ? "

" Paolina ? " he exclaimed quickly, bending forward.

" Yes ; she went to your flat sometimes, the scandalmongers said, and they coupled your names in the club and at Giacosa's."

" They did ! " he cried fiercely, starting to his feet. " You say they invented scandal about her because we merely had a business transaction regarding her pictures. I succeeded in selling them for her to an American, and she was naturally obliged to me. It is true that I lent her a small loan to pay off

a mortgage upon her property at Santa Lucia, and that she came to my apartments quite a number of times, but never alone. She dined with me on three or four occasions during the time my aunt, Mrs. Malcolmson, was staying with me. And yet they coupled her name with mine!" he cried. "It's scandalous, George. What have you thought of me?"

"I believed it to be true," I said simply.

"You—who loved her—heard those false tales and believed her to be unworthy! Ah! I see it all now. I realise now what you must have suffered. And yet you remained silent."

"Paolina left Florence," I said. "After the tragedy she disappeared."

"Why?"

I shrugged my shoulders. What reply could I give to his question?

"They said I loved Paolina," he remarked bitterly, in a hoarse voice, as though speaking to himself. "Ah! yes, she was the most beautiful woman in Florence, as you yourself know, George, and I admired her, as did a thousand other men. But there was never a word of affection spoken between us, for a very good reason—a reason

which I will now confess to you, in order to clear her of this stigma and remove doubt from your mind." And pausing, he blew a cloud of smoke from his lips and sighed deeply, for the remembrance of the past was to him full of bitterness.

"I think it was about a year before the mysterious affair in my rooms, when, one day, while idling in the Pitti Gallery, where I so often spent hours studying the old masters, a young English girl, in passing me, slipped on the polished floor and hurt her ankle. I assisted her, and she allowed me to take her to her hotel in a carriage. She was staying with her mother at Paoli's, and her name, I found, was Wentworth. They came from some out-of-the-way place in Northamptonshire, and were wintering in Florence. Her name was May, and she was, I found, very charming. Her sweet English beauty attracted me, and in a week I found myself deeply in love with her. Mrs. Wentworth was a stiff, unbending woman, of that sharp-nosed type peculiar to Midland villages, and it was with the greatest difficulty that we were able to meet secretly, sometimes in one or other of the churches, in the Duomo, or in one of the galleries.



"SLIPPED ON THE POLISHED FLOOR AND HURT HER ANKLE."

More than once she managed to slip in and ascend to my apartment where she was chaperoned by my aunt, who was aware of our secret. And so the winter months went on—and our love was mutual. One day, when I met her out in the Bobilo Gardens, I found that her manner had changed, and on being pressed she told me that she had heard of my association with a woman named Demaria. I saw at once she was madly jealous of her, and protested that there was no love between us. But she disbelieved me, and for a fortnight an estrangement fell between us. Then we readjusted our little quarrel, and the Wentworths returned to England. In the following season they returned to Paoli's for a flying visit on their way to Rome for Easter, and it was then that May and I became engaged in secret, and I gave her a ring. The following week I had to go to Venice, and within ten days of giving her my pledge the police discovered me struck down by an assassin."

"And then?"

"I longed to reveal myself to her, and to tell her the truth. Yet how could I? Something—a very grave fact—prevented

my coming forward and proving to the police the mistake into which they had fallen. No ; I was compelled to leave Italy, and to allow my love to mourn for me. Could any man's position, George, be worse than my own ? I adored her, and yet I dared not reveal that I still lived, and was still ready to make her my wife."

"She mourned for you," I said slowly. "And if she knew of Paolina's platonic friendship she would probably attribute your death to her jealousy, knowing the latent fire within the breast of the Italian woman. Has that suggestion ever occurred to you ?"

"What ?" he cried, staring at me. "That Paolina was a murderess ! Never !"

I remembered the confession of the Frenchman Vernet, "*The Spider's Eye*," but said nothing. Fred was evidently still unsuspicious of her.

"You don't think that your love for this English girl had been discovered by Paolina ?" I asked presently, after a pause.

"Of course it had. Paolina spoke to me, saying that she had seen May and her mother driving in the Cascine, and that she congratulated me upon my choice."

"She was not jealous—you are certain ?"

"My dear fellow, how could she be?" he asked. "Were you not her accepted lover? Were you not engaged to be married to her? You may entertain suspicions," he said, "but I can declare to you as one of your best and oldest friends that, on Paolina's part, there was never the slightest suspicion of flirtation with any man. She was beautiful as Raphael's Madonna in the Uffizzi, and as chaste as ice. Why, as you must know, Florence is the worst city for gossip in the whole of Europe, and there's no pretty woman but who has some scandal whispered about her."

"Then you actually swear to me, Fred," I cried, starting up and looking straight at him, "you swear to me that she has never loved you—I mean that what the gossips said was entirely untrue?"

He sprang to his feet and gripped me by the hand, saying, in a firm voice:

"I swear to you, George, that to the best of my knowledge and belief Paolina is an honest woman, and fitted to be your wife."

In his answer there was the ring of truth. I knew well the sterling qualities of Fred Ingram, yet this fear of shame which might have caused him to take his own life added

increased mystery to the astounding affair. The death of the unknown man in his room had, he said, given back to him his own life.

Was he aware, I wondered, of the tragic end of the woman he had loved, and to whom he had in secret given his pledge? He made no mention of it; therefore I remained silent.

Had I misjudged Paolina? That was the question uppermost in my mind.

While I had lived in Florence watching her in those never-to-be-forgotten days of winter sunshine, and believing what the gossips said was well founded, she had all the time been true to her vow of affection for me, for he swore to me that what the cruel scandalmongers had said was false, and prompted, most probably, by some man whom she had snubbed, and who had thus taken his revenge.

Alas! a woman's good name is constantly in jeopardy in that winter city of chatter and scandal. The most honest and upright woman is too often the victim of some spiteful rival who invents a base calumny and spreads it at the "at homes" among her set. And if I could believe Fred, Paolina—my Paolina, the playmate of

my childhood's days and the love of my maturer youth—had been one of those many innocent victims.

Yet why had that French adventurer, dying in the prison hospital, called Zoli to his side and denounced her as an assassin?

There were many puzzling facts, I remembered. Paolina had given Bob Alderson that address in Burton Crescent; therefore the two men had probably met. Besides, Paolina herself must be aware that the man whom she was suspected of having killed through jealousy was still alive. She knew his address. They had probably met at that house, the occupier of which was one of her compatriots.

Again, the tragedy at Radstone had been fully reported in the London newspapers, and it was certainly strange if the man smoking so calmly in the chair before me had not thus learned the terrible truth—unless, as might be the case, the papers had been carefully kept from him.

"Why have you come down here?" I at last inquired.

"Didn't I tell you? I've turned actor. The company I'm touring with commences a week's engagement here the day after

to-morrow. You'd laugh, George, if I told you what my weekly salary is—scarcely enough to keep body and soul together. I used to spend more in cocktails at Giacosa's. I couldn't live, indeed, had I not managed by good fortune to save a little from my estate. The rest all went to my brother. Life with a touring company is one of the best modes of concealing one's identity, spending a week here and then away to the further end of England, clean-shaven, disguised, and under a name not one's own." And he smiled bitterly through the haze of tobacco-smoke.

"I saw you come out of a house in Burton Crescent," I remarked.

"Yes; that's where I lodge when in London. The place is kept by an Italian, who also has a little restaurant across in the Tottenham Court Road. The diggings are generally let to professionals—cheap and comfortable."

"And is Paolina aware of your headquarters in London?"

"Paolina!" he cried. "Why, Paolina is still in America. She, like the others, believes me to be dead. I wonder why she fled after the affair?"

I held my breath, recollecting that criminal by whose confession she had been denounced.

"Then you have not seen her since the day when the world believed you to be dead?" I asked breathlessly.

"No," he replied; "we have never met, but I heard that she had gone to America. It was foolish of her not to have remained in Florence, for the very act of escaping no doubt raised suspicion against her."

"Yes, a grave suspicion. She fled in fear—without a doubt."

"And is she still in America?" he asked.

"No; in England. I have seen her and spoken with her many times."

"You've spoken to her!" he exclaimed quickly. "Did she ever mention me?"

"Often, and with a thousand regrets. She always declared to me what you have to-night assured me—that there was no love between you."

"Of course not. Her whole thoughts were of you, my dear old fellow. And what man had better right to love her than yourself?"

"I know—I know," I said in a low voice. "But, truth to tell, Fred, I can somehow

never set my doubts at rest. Why did she fly, after that mysterious affair ? ”

“ Ah, why ? ” sighed the man now known to the world as Henry Garthorne. “ There was some mystery which at present we can’t solve. She holds some secret—possibly mine. That is why she must never know of my existence. You understand,” he added, looking at me very seriously, “ you must never, by any means, let her know that I still live.”

“ Why not ? You are surely still friends.”

“ Ah, George, you don’t know the exact circumstances,” he cried. “ Women act injudiciously sometimes. I told you just now that there was something I dare not face.”

“ You mean that she holds knowledge of certain facts which you do not desire exposed ? ” I suggested, much puzzled at his manner.

“ No ; that’s not exactly it,” he said. “ I don’t believe she would willingly divulge the facts that may have come to her knowledge. But, after all, she’s a woman, and few women can keep a secret.”

“ And, if exposed, what would it mean to you, Fred ? ” I asked, looking into his grave, dark eyes.

"I have already told you," he answered, in a voice scarcely above a whisper. "I'm no coward, George, as you know; but if she divulged it, it would mean death—by my own hand."

I sat silent, pondering deeply. She surely already knew of his continued existence, for had not she herself written that address in Burton Crescent beneath the postage stamps of the letter addressed to Robert Alderson?

If she had not been to the gloomy house off the Euston Road, she was, no doubt, aware that Ingram made it his headquarters in London, and perhaps had been watching his movements in secret.

To reassure my friend, however, I said:

"I don't see that you need fear, in the least. She surely is not aware that you are still alive. Therefore, why anticipate disaster?"

Those mysterious hints of his regarding an exposure he dare not face held me mystified.

He shook his head dubiously, saying:

"You tell me she's here, in England; therefore there is a distinct danger."

"I am not certain that she is in England

at this moment," I said. "She is, I think, probably on the Continent. But tell me," I asked, "do you chance to have met a man named Alderson—Robert Alderson?"

"Certainly. I know him slightly. We met when I was playing in Liverpool about a month ago. He was a friend, I believe, of one of the girls in the company. He came to London, and for the past couple of days he has had a room in the same house as myself. He seems a merry fellow—been lately called to the Bar, I believe. But why do you ask?"

"Because I have reason to know that he had taken lodgings in Burton Crescent," I answered. "Has he ever endeavoured to find out from you anything regarding the past?"

"Why, what do you mean?" gasped, looking at me anxiously. "Is the fellow a spy? Do you think he suspects the truth?"

CHAPTER XV.

WHEREIN HEARTS ARE EXILED.

IF the address written beneath the postage stamps had been in Bob's handwriting, then I could have understood that he had sent his address in secret to Paolina. But the handwriting was unmistakably hers, with those peculiarly Italian flourishes, an ornate style that is taught in the convent schools.

Fred Ingram pressed me to explain why I had referred to Robert Alderson, but I merely told him that I was acquainted with him, and was surprised that he had taken lodgings at that house. Knowing him to be a man of considerable means, I suspected that he had gone there with some ulterior motive.

I made no mention of his mysterious friendship with Paolina, or of the suspicion that had now arisen within me—namely,

that the object of Bob's presence in that house was to watch the man who had so successfully concealed his existence from his friends.

Was it possible that upon one of her day excursions to London with Mrs. Wentworth Paolina had met and recognised him, and had now, in secret, invoked Bob's aid in order to satisfy herself that she had not been mistaken, and that the Englishman of the Piazza who was believed to be dead, still lived?

If this were so, then my friend existed in the peril of which he seemed to entertain some strange intuition.

I turned the conversation to May Wentworth, the woman for whom he had confessed his love.

"Ah!" he sighed. "I suppose I shall never see her again—ever!"

"Why?" I asked, wondering whether he was really unaware of her tragic end.

"Because I dare not go down there again," was his reply. "Do you know, George, about six months ago my mind became so full of her again, that I determined to risk everything in order to see

her once more. I knew where she lived, for in Florence she had often spoken to me about her home. Therefore, one summer's day I took the train down to Brackley and walked along a long white high road to Radstone, a little old-world village, where a short distance beyond I found the Grange, the home of my love who mourned for me. From beyond the iron railings and belt of trees I could catch a glimpse of a long, low old-fashioned house, standing back behind a wide sloping lawn, with great beeches and dark spreading cedars, and as I stood there in the summer sunset peering through, I caught sight of someone in a white cotton dress, seated alone in a long wicker lounge chair on the lawn, reading a book. It was my May—my love!"

"You spoke to her? You made yourself known, surely?" I exclaimed.

"My dear fellow, how could I, when to expose the fraud I now live means suicide?" he cried hoarsely. "No. I stood there, gazing across the fresh green and looking upon the fair countenance I had so often kissed. She seemed older, graver, and more thoughtful as she raised her eyes and looked across the lawn at the terriers playing in my

direction. She was unaware of my presence. The golden light fell upon her hair as she lay back upon the cushion of the chair, gazing pensively at the sky, and thinking—thinking, perhaps, of the man who had so strangely met with his end. How I longed to dash in and to fall there at her feet! Yet it was impossible, for the world I was dead and forgotten; and I dare not reveal the truth for fear of fatal consequences. I think in those moments my head must have reeled, for far down the lawn, at the side of the house, I seemed to see an apparition of the past. Walking alone, and bending to gather some flowers, was a figure in pale blue, with a dark and strangely beautiful face. Indeed, such tricks did my vision play me on that never-to-be-forgotten evening that I could have sworn that the other woman was Paolina herself. I looked again and again, becoming almost convinced. And yet I knew that it could not be so. Of a sudden I heard the sound of harness bells, and scarcely could I turn and conceal my face before a smart victoria and pair swept past me and turned into the drive, and on through the greenery till it pulled up before the house, and I saw that the figure descend-

ing was that of Mrs. Wentworth. May rose, took her book, and entered the house with her mother; the woman who bore such a striking resemblance to Paolina disappeared, and I was left to gaze across the empty lawn, where the blackbirds and thrushes were hopping about in search of their evening meal.

"At risk of being thought a loiterer by any passer-by, I remained until the after-glow deepened into twilight, and I saw the big, pink-shaded lamp lit in the drawing-room and moving figures within. May herself, in ignorance of my existence, came and lowered the blinds, thus shutting me out, and then I returned to Brackley and took the night train up to London. That was the first time I had seen my love since my 'death,'—and I shall never dare to return. The risk is far too great. Besides, the sight of her was too much for me. It is a cruel fate indeed that she, whom I love so well, must be another's, while I am compelled to live on and endure in secret. Indeed, so overcome was I in that hour when I watched in silence that I scarcely know what I saw or did. So full was I of the past that I could have sworn that Paolina herself, the

woman of whom May was so madly jealous, was there in the garden."

"One's imagination plays pranks under certain conditions," I remarked, reflecting within myself how near his suspicions were to the actual truth.

And yet it seemed that he was unaware of poor May's untimely end. He was still so deeply in love with her—her very memory was to him as something sacred—that I could not bring myself to relate the tragic affair, and more especially that Paolina was again missing.

So bewildering had the maze of doubt and mystery now become, that the deeper I reflected the more inexplicable was the enigma that presented itself. Surely the career of no other man had been so stunted, or his happiness and love so ruthlessly torn from him, as mine had been! Even now, as in the silence of the night I am striving to reduce the puzzling circumstances to a plain, intelligible record, I find a thousand difficulties, so persistently did circumstances always conspire against me, and I find myself lost in wonder that I am still alive to chronicle with pen and ink the amazing facts.

In those ponderous occurrence-books at Scotland Yard, and at the Questura in the Via Ginori, in Florence; in the official register of deaths of British subjects preserved at the British Consulate-General in Florence, and in the huge register at Somerset House; in the evidence on blue foolscap, taken before the coroner for South Northamptonshire; and in the Central Office of the Northamptonshire Constabulary, there still exist certain entries which are open to all who care to search. They chronicle mysteries in brief, terse, official language; but they give no detail of the astounding truth. The latter is written here, within the covers of this present volume. From it the police themselves will doubtless learn much that will surprise them, and from it you who read will also be able to judge the seriousness and peril of the situation, and form your own conclusion as to whether I acted aright in my attitude towards Paolina Demaria.

As you read, put yourself in my own place, and then judge what your own actions would have been in similar circumstances.

In this great, teeming, bustling world of

ours there are many of you who are at the very moment living in doubt and mystery, with heart in exile, torn between love and duty; and to such I inscribe this record of one of the most remarkable mysteries of to-day.

The man seated before me asked where I had met Paolina, and I related to him our encounter on the Brunswick lawns at Hove. I did not, however, reveal to him that the vision he had seen upon the lawn of the Grange was my well-beloved herself. I was anxious to learn why Bob Alderson had taken up his residence in that grimy old house in Burton Crescent, and the true reason of Paolina's flight from Radstone.

"I wonder," he murmured presently, "whether that fellow Alderson has been trying to find out who I really am? I recollect only the day before yesterday, while we were walking together along the Strand, he spoke of Italy, and described a visit to Florence. But I did not mention that I had ever been in that city. I listened to all he had to say, and merely remarked how much I longed to see the city of Dante and the Medici."

"He doesn't know your real name, of course?"

"No; I have never used it, or told anyone, since the day in Venice when I read in the newspaper that I was 'dead.'"

I longed to discover Paolina's whereabouts; and while sitting there, a thought occurred to me that, if I returned to Burton Crescent in the morning and watched, I might meet Bob, and by keeping observation upon his movements find my love's place of concealment. I call her my love, because notwithstanding all the suspicion and doubt, she was still the only woman I had really in fond affection.

"You will remain here in Bournemouth all the week?" I remarked.

"I am compelled to. You must come to the theatre and see me in a new part—a 'dead' man as actor," he laughed. "It would prove a draw if the public knew the truth—wouldn't it?"

"I must go up to town again in the morning," I said; "I have urgent business there. But I'll return, and come and see you on the stage. You don't think that this fellow Alderson will follow you down here?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. I believe he's rather sweet on the girl. She's not a bad sort. Her father's on the variety stage. Alderson may come down to see her, of course."

"Then if he does, keep him at arm's length," I urged quickly. "The fact that he's spoken of Florence is suspicious, to say the least. I don't like him," I added frankly.

"What do you know about him?"

"Very little to his credit," was my quick reply. "Moreover, if I'm not greatly mistaken, he knows Paolina."

"Knows Paolina!" he gasped, his countenance grey in an instant. "Then she must have seen and recognised me, as I feared; and she has put that fellow on to learn what he can regarding my past. She is still unconvinced that I am alive, and has set him the task of discovering the truth. I see, George!" he cried, clenching his hands. "I see that I am in a peril more deadly than I had ever imagined. She means to first satisfy herself that I am Fred Ingram, and then——"

"Well, and then—what?"

"And then," he added, in a changed,

broken voice, "and then she will tell the truth—the truth, George," he whispered wildly, "that truth which I dare not face!"

CHAPTER XVI.

REFERS TO A WOMAN'S SECRET.

NEXT day was a dreary one in London, murky above and sloppy underfoot.

On arrival at Waterloo from Bournemouth I went straight to Burton Crescent, but, although I kept a faithful vigil there until nightfall, Alderson did not appear.

My own theory was that Fred having left, he had given up his room and gone elsewhere. Without a doubt he was following the man who was believed to be dead, but for what reason was at present a mystery, except it was as Fred surmised—that Paolina had enlisted his services on her behalf.

But where was she? The police were searching everywhere, without a doubt, yet up to the present she had successfully eluded them. Having found Bob, I should, I felt confident, obtain knowledge of her where-

abouts. Therefore I spared no effort to trace the man who for some unknown purpose had occupied that humble lodging in Burton Crescent. From place to place that I knew he frequented I went, but neither saw nor heard anything of him. His friends, one and all, declared that they had not seen him for weeks.

The day following, and the day after, I went about London hoping to meet him, but in vain. I sent a messenger boy to the house in Burton Crescent to inquire if he were at home, but the reply he brought was that Mr. Alderson had left three days before. I searched the great dining-rooms of the Carlton and Prince's, and the gay supper-rooms of the Savoy and Scott's—resorts which he often frequented ; but there was no sign of him, and I began to wonder whether I had not better return to Calcot. Walter was no doubt in town in search of me, and I knew not at any moment when I might encounter him.

The days went by uneventfully. I wrote to Fred at Bournemouth, and he replied saying that he was there until Sunday morning, when he would be compelled to leave with the company for Hastings.

o

Alderson had not been down, he said, and inquiries of the young lady who had apparently so attracted him had revealed nothing regarding his whereabouts. She believed him to be still in London.

This caused me to renew my vigilance, until, after many disappointments, I one afternoon discovered him sitting quite unconcernedly in a corner of the big smoking-room of the Hotel Cecil, talking to a man whose grey tweed suit and soft felt hat marked him as an American. The latter was evidently a chance-met acquaintance, for as I entered Bob rose, and, excusing himself, came forward to greet me.

"Why, my dear old fellow!" he cried, gripping my hand. "I wondered whether you were in town. I've been away—over to Brussels. Only got back at six this morning. I'm staying here. You left Walter all right, I suppose?"

"Yes, yes," I answered lamely. "Fairly well." And he walked with me to the opposite side of the big tiled room, where we took a seat in a spot near a window overlooking the Embankment.

Then he turned suddenly to me, saying:
"I've seen in the papers all about that

awful affair at Radstone. I suppose you've been over there, and know all about it?"

"Yes," I said, glancing at him with considerable suspicion. "I was there when the police made their examination. Poor May was strangled, without a doubt."

"By whom?" he asked quickly. "Is there any suspicion against anyone?"

"The police keep their theory to themselves," was my answer. "Perhaps we shall know more at the adjourned inquest."

He made no mention of Paolina, and I therefore did not utter her name. My line of action was one of patient observation. Why, I wondered, had he been over to Brussels?

"Well," he said, "it is a most terrible thing for the Wentworths. As you know, I came up here the day before, and on arrival found I had to go to Paris to sign some documents regarding some property I have at Enghien. So I left the same night. While there I read in the English papers of the mysterious affair, and wrote at once to you at Radstone."

"Ah! I suppose I must have left before your letter arrived," I said. "What did you say?"

"I asked you to express my sympathy with Mr. and Mrs. Wentworth in their bereavement, and also to write and tell me the whole of the facts."

"They have appeared in the papers," I said. "As far as the police are able to make out, the assassin escaped from the house by an upstairs window, across the roof of the stables and coach-house. In all probability the person who committed the deed was in the house when the place was locked up."

"What!" he exclaimed, looking sharply at me. "Concealed—in hiding there? Do the police think that?"

"The place was secured at night, and there is no sign of any door or window having been forced from the outside," was my answer.

"A most extraordinary affair!" he remarked reflectively. "I wonder, George, who is the culprit?"

"Or what motive there could have been?" I said. "First discover the motive, and then the arrest of the murderer is easy."

I looked straight into his eyes, and recollected that strange note of his addressed to the woman who had fled, and the address

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in London which she had sent him in secret hidden beneath those two halfpenny stamps.

He seemed gratified that we had met, and betrayed no sign of nervousness. He pressed me to relate the most minute details of the mysterious affair, declaring that he would go down to Radstone and learn everything for himself, only he felt that his visit would scarcely be in good taste at that moment.

"Paolina must be very upset at the death of her most intimate friend," he remarked at last, as he struck a match to light a cigar.

I looked at him, but his eyes were fixed upon the match, and I saw in that a fear of meeting my glance.

"Look here, Bob," I said, impulsively, bending across the little table between us. "Let us speak quite frankly. Paolina has disappeared!"

"Disappeared!" he gasped, his brows knit in an instant as he started up. "What! You mean to say that Paolina is not at Radstone?"

"She fled on the night of the tragedy," I said in a low, distinct voice.

"On the night of the tragedy! Then—

why—then they probably suspect her! Surely it can't be true!" he cried. "What does Walter say? How does he bear it?"

"Badly," was my response.

"But do the police really suspect her of killing her friend?" inquired he breathlessly.

"Tell me all you know, George."

"Then you were not aware that Paolina was missing?" I asked very gravely, fixing him with my eyes.

"By Heaven, no! At least, I never believed that the police suspected her."

"How long were you in Paris?" I asked.

"Two days. Then I returned to London."

"And went to a room in Burton Crescent, which you had occupied when you were in town earlier in the week?"

"How do you know?" he gasped, his face blanching to his very lips.

"I heard so," was my simple response. Then, facing him boldly, I added: "Look here, Bob, in this affair it is surely of no use to beat about the bush. It is far too serious. Where is Paolina?"

"Where is she? Why, my dear fellow, I haven't the slightest idea."

"Well, I can tell you this. The police have discovered that she left her room on

the night in question, crept across the stable roof and descended to the yard, afterwards making her exit by a latched gate at the end of the fruit-garden. Further, she left behind her all her correspondence, including a letter written to her by yourself, declaring your readiness to keep any appointment she might make."

He sat glaring at me as though I were some evil spirit arisen from the tomb. In his eyes was a mingled expression of surprise and cowardice, and I saw that the white hand holding the cigar trembled.

"Then you mean to convey that the police suspect me as an accomplice," he laughed forcedly. "The situation is certainly very interesting."

"But you own, surely, that you wrote that letter to her?" I said persistently, determined to get at the truth.

"Well," he laughed, "I suppose I can't very well deny my own handwriting. But the letter in question referred to an entirely innocent matter. I assure you I had, when I wrote it, no intention of becoming an accessory to the murder of May Wentworth—a girl, indeed, for whom I entertained a fond regard close akin to affection."

"We are friendly, Bob, and I merely give you warning of what the police suspect," I said, in the hope that he would seek my counsel. "Walter is, of course, eager to learn the exact nature of your extraordinary confidence with Paolina."

"That's why he has not written to me, I suppose!" he exclaimed bitterly. "He actually believes that I, his dearest friend, would play him false."

"That letter is in itself plain evidence that you and Paolina hold some secret in common."

"And if we do—what then?"

"Walter has surely a right to know its nature."

"No, George. Forgive me for saying so, but he has not. The secret is one that concerns Paolina and myself alone."

I was surprised at the defiant boldness of his reply.

"But the matter is more serious than you appear to regard it," I pointed out. "May has been brutally murdered; Paolina escaped from the house that night, and has not since been seen; a letter has been found in which you assert your readiness to assist her; you yourself were also absent

on the night in question—all facts which convince the police of Paolina's guilt."

"Do they really think her guilty?" he asked, looking at me seriously. "Tell me frankly, George—what do they suspect?"

"They can only suspect one thing of a person who has fled—from her lover, from everything. Think of all that she has sacrificed; and what for, if not to save her life?"

"Ah! I see. You yourself suspect her to be the culprit. You believe, too, that I met her on the night in question. Well, I admit that I did meet her that night at the Croughton cross-roads. I had—well, an object in meeting her there."

"Then if you are not anxious to be arrested as an accomplice, I should advise you to go down to Northampton and explain the whole circumstances to Blackman, the police superintendent," I suggested.

"Certainly not," was his prompt reply. "I have no fear whatever of the police. I deeply regret that the poor girl has lost her life, but that does not compel me to expose a woman's secret."

"Paolina escaped with you," I said in a hard, reproachful voice. "Therefore, if you do not feel bound to answer to the police,

you are certainly bound by all the traditions of a gentleman to answer to Walter Guilford."

"That is entirely her concern—not mine. If she is prepared to sacrifice all that she appears to have relinquished, it is her own affair."

"But can't you see the perilous and invidious position in which you both are placed?" I pointed out. "You are responsible to Walter."

"I don't admit anything of the sort. Paolina is certainly mistress of her own actions."

"Well," I remarked after a pause, "it is, of course, not for me to judge or condemn you. But you will certainly be compelled by the police to vindicate yourself. Paolina may be arrested at any moment, and then you will be compelled to come forward, either as witness against her, or to make confession and save her."

"Is there actually a warrant out—are you quite certain of that?"

I replied in the affirmative, adding:

"Her photograph has already been copied and circulated—the snapshot picture that poor Walter took of her."

He leaned his elbows upon the table, and, resting his shaven chin in his hands, looked straight into my face. In those past few minutes he had grown quite calm, apparently reflecting deeply, as though trying to devise some means of escaping from a position both compromising and dangerous.

"I know, George, that my secret confidences with Paolina must appear strange and suspicious to you," he said in a changed voice. "I have already admitted to you certain facts. I do not seek to conceal from you that we exchanged correspondence unknown to Walter, and that more than once we met clandestinely—always as friends, never as lovers. On the night of that tragic occurrence at the Grange we met by appointment, as I have told you, at the Croughton cross-roads beyond Brackley, on the Bicester road. Beyond that, however, I can tell you nothing."

"But you know where she is now."

"I am entirely in ignorance. She has gone."

"Fled, you mean."

"Well, if you like to put it so. She left me no word as to her destination."

"And is not that very fact all the more

convincing that she fears that the police are in search of her?" I asked.

"It is suspicious, I admit." And a slight sigh escaped him.

"And if she is arrested—as she must be, sooner or later—do you believe that she will be able to prove an *alibi*?" I asked eagerly, anxious to ascertain his opinion regarding the mysterious affair.

"If she is innocent, how can they seek to convict her?" he asked. "The English law does not assume a person's guilt, as that absurd criminal law does abroad. She remains innocent until convicted."

"Then, speaking frankly, you have no fear of her conviction?"

"Unless the police can bring direct proof," he said, "which will, I think, be somewhat difficult."

His words caused me to reflect. I could not grasp what was exactly his meaning. It seemed almost as though he knew that she was guilty, and yet so cleverly had the deed been accomplished that both she and he were defiant, knowing that there was no direct evidence sufficient to cause a jury to convict.

I sat staring at him, puzzled more than ever.

The crime was utterly devoid of motive. And yet I recollected that a woman will tell a lie without motive—a man never.

Why, I wondered, had he watched Fred Ingram so closely, and afterwards made a flying visit to Brussels?

"You disregard entirely the suspicions of the police, then?" I exclaimed after a long pause.

"Not in the least," he assured me. "I have no desire to be dragged into the ugly affair any more than she has. If the police really suspect her, then all I can say is they've got hold of an entirely wrong clue."

"Then why doesn't she, or even you, come forward and make a statement?" I queried.

He was some time before he replied, but when he did I saw that he had suddenly grown frank and earnest.

"You ask me that direct question, George," he said in a low voice, bending towards me so that the waiter lounging near should not overhear. "Well, I'll give you a direct answer, and tell you that there is something behind that affair that's far more mysterious than either of us imagine. You ask why one or other of us does not

make a statement. To tell you the truth, we dare not. We are both aware of certain facts; but so utterly astounding are they, that if they were told we should not be believed. To you, the affair is no doubt an absolute and complete mystery; but, in the light of knowledge I have since succeeded in obtaining, it is not to me."

Was he seeking by a ruse to shield Carolina? His whole attitude, the nervous twitching of his lips and the suspicious look in his shifty eyes, increased my doubts.

"You ought not, I contend, to thus try to defeat the ends of justice by holding back any knowledge in your possession," I said firmly.

"There I differ from you, George," he answered, facing me boldly and speaking distinctly, "if that knowledge reflects upon a woman's honour. I hold a woman's secret, and to me a woman's secret is inviolable."

CHAPTER XVII.

PLACES MATTERS IN A NEW LIGHT.

ON my return to the "Bath" at Bourne-mouth on the following day I found the "dead man" seated in the glass-enclosed lounge, smoking, and intent upon a newspaper.

He jumped up quickly when I greeted him, and then, pointing to a paragraph in the paper, said, in a broken voice :

"Read that ! Why—why didn't you tell me ?"

And he threw himself back in the chair with knit brows in an attitude of deep dejection.

He had discovered the tragedy at Radstone Grange ! The paragraph was a brief one, remarking that the adjourned inquiry into the death of Miss May Wentworth was to be held the day after to-morrow, but that

the police had no further evidence to offer, and that the affair was still a mystery.

"I've read all the facts," he said hoarsely. "My poor love has been murdered. Here, in the hotel, they keep a file of the *Morning Post*, and I've spent the whole morning looking it up. It's terrible—terrible."

"Yes," I sighed. "It is, Fred—a complete mystery."

"But why didn't you tell me about it?" he asked gravely. "Why did you allow me to think that my loved one still lived, when she was already in her grave?"

"Because you have had sufficient misfortune in your life, old fellow," I answered with sympathy, noticing how utterly broken down he was. "I could not bring myself to put any further grief upon you. It was best that you should discover the truth for yourself."

"I have discovered it!" he said with deep emotion. "My darling is dead—dead! She has carried her secret with her to the grave, and therefore all chance of reassuming my former status has been snatched from me. I must now remain as I am until I die—and the sooner death comes to me the better."

"Then May held a secret?" I cried, pricking up my ears.

"Yes," he answered slowly. "She has died without divulging it. Had she revealed the truth, I might have been able to extricate myself from my present peril."

"I don't understand you, Fred. Be more explicit," I urged.

"No, I suppose you don't understand," he said bitterly. "And as for being more explicit, that is beyond my power. I only know that she held the secret which, if revealed to me, would place me in an attitude of defiance. I could reassume my former position, fearless of my enemies or of the shame they seek to place upon me."

"And have you never sought her and asked her to reveal it to you?"

"No; because I did not know that she held the secret until after I had allowed the Florence police to declare that I was dead. Then, alas, it was too late. I dared not go forward and approach her, fearing lest she might refuse to tell me. Her refusal would have meant my exposure."

"But she loved you, therefore she would not have refused," I said.

"She might have been prevented by

fear," he answered. "She had enemies as well as myself."

"And it may have been one of those who is the assassin?" I suggested.

His face was white, his teeth were clenched, his jaws set hard, and he drew a long breath, as though he held suspicion of the culprit. Did he, too, suspect Paolina?

His refined countenance was now pale and haggard—his clean-shaven mouth twitched nervously—his dark eyes were fixed upon the spacious garden outside.

We were alone in the big lounge, with its palms and statuary and cosy corners, and the quiet was broken only by the low plashing of the fountain and the shrill trilling of a canary in its gilded cage.

"They killed her!" he said, hoarsely. "Killed her because they feared lest she might reveal the truth. She believed me to be dead, remember, and therefore whatever exposure she made could not injure me. It could only throw opprobrium upon my memory."

"Then, being aware of the motive of the crime, you know the person to whose interest it was that the secret should be kept," I said. "You will avenge the poor girl's

death, Fred. You will give me information that I can act upon?" I urged.

But he sat staring straight before him without moving a muscle. He was immersed in his own thoughts, for that sudden blow had crushed him. Living outside his own world, "dead," and yet still existing as he was, he cherished her memory as the one link between the past and the present. His description of his secret visit to Radstone was sufficient proof of that. And now that she had been taken, his last hope had disappeared. She had carried her secret with her to the grave.

What he had revealed to me placed an entirely different complexion upon the affair. There was motive, and it seemed as though he strongly suspected the culprit. My sole object was to induce him to explain further facts, in order that I might set out a line of action through all the complications, which seemed now to have crowded upon each other.

I urged him to tell me the whole truth, but for a long time he did not respond to my questions. The discovery had aroused within him deep regrets and fierce revenge. I saw by the fire in his eyes that he intended

that the culprit should meet his just punishment, yet next moment that look of defiance gave place to a dejected attitude of bitter grief and blank despair.

"You will surely not let this cowardly assassination go unavenged, Fred," I exclaimed presently. "You can still remain unknown and unseen, and allow me to act upon the information with which you can furnish me. I may at once tell you that I knew poor May."

"You knew her!" he exclaimed, surprised. "Where did you meet her?"

"At her own home. The Wentworths were friends of Walter Guilford, of Calcot, where I sometimes go for the hunting."

"Guilford?" he repeated. "Is that the fellow who's heir to old Lord Towcester?"

"The same, and one of my oldest friends. He has Calcot, and is keen on hunting," I said; but I did not explain that Bob was also his friend, or that Paolina had been the guest of the Wentworths and the friend of May.

"Ah!" he said. "Then you know how sweet and charming she was—you will not wonder that I loved her."

"And she loved you," I said.

"How do you know that?"

"Because she once admitted it to me. When she knew that I had lived in Florence, she told me that she knew you, and that you had been lovers in secret without her parents' knowledge."

He sighed again, and I saw that tears stood in his eyes. The recollection of the past was too full of sweet memories, now turned to gall. The canker-worm of a broken love had eaten deep into his honest, manly heart. So closely had he kept from me the secret of his love for May that, in those days of our close intimacy in Florence, he had never revealed the truth to me. He had, on the contrary, unjustly allowed me to believe that he was Paolina's lover. And I had prejudged her as false in consequence.

His changed fortune, too, oppressed him. From a man of wealth and leisure, a dilettante of art and a collector of curios in the unfrequented byways of Italy, a member of the Florence Club—that most exclusive institution in Europe—and the centre of an influential circle of winter idlers by the Arno, he had been forced to hide himself in an obscure touring dramatic company, one of a public-house haunting "crowd"

who took "diggings" in the frowsy back streets of country towns, and who lived from hand to mouth in the way of most of such companies. He held himself aloof from them in their private life, stinting himself in every way in order to live at a decent hotel, and by reason of that was nicknamed "Gentleman Harry." From principal to super all knew instinctively that he was really a gentleman, and treated him as such, for it is no uncommon thing even in these prosaic days for a man of birth to be a member of a company of strolling players. And in no sphere does birth more quickly tell than in that little circle who dash from town to town to fulfil their engagements "for six nights only."

He had long been a clever amateur actor, and in the old days had played at charity performances in the Pergola at Florence, and therefore he had little difficulty in obtaining the small part in the popular comedy drama which had previously been so successful in London, entitled, *The Man of the Moment*.

"If I were not held in silence, as I am, I might go down to Radstone and seek for some clue there that might lead to a conviction," he said in a voice of discontent.

"But as I am, I can do nothing—nothing whatever."

"Except allow me to stand in your place as the avenger," I suggested, as I bent earnestly towards him.

"No, George," he said, with a faint smile; "it is useless. My poor dear is dead; she has fallen a victim, just as I have fallen."

"But do you actually refuse to take any steps to place the police upon the track of the assassin?" I asked, surprised.

"For the present, yes," he said. Then suddenly he added: "I know, George, that this attitude of mine must strike you as extraordinary. I have a reason for staying my hand, but I assure you that the lapse of time will in no way lessen the fierceness of my revenge. My love has lost her life, and it remains for me to bring the assassin to punishment. Depend upon it that when the day comes for denouncing the culprit I shall not be slow in doing so. You shall be my mouthpiece, I promise you, and when I tell you the amazing truth you will be astounded."

With that response I was compelled to be satisfied. He would tell me nothing more.

"Why refer further to it?" he asked, when I pressed him. "The affair is painful enough to me. Let us drop it."

And so, compelled to act as he desired, we spent the remainder of the morning walking about the town and by the sea.

After luncheon a fact suddenly crossed my mind that I had not hitherto recollected—namely, that Dora lived in Bournemouth. Therefore, with an excuse that I had to make a call upon friends, I left the hotel, and had no difficulty in finding Studland Towers, the handsome residence of Sir Edmund Hallett, situate out near the golf links, and surrounded by beautiful pine-woods.

As I ascended the drive through the well-kept grounds, with their terraces before the long, castellated house, I saw that it gave evidence everywhere of being the home of a man of wealth and taste; and within, when, after inquiring for Miss Dora, I was shown into the huge drawing-room with its genuine Louis Quatorze furniture, I saw that its owner was also a connoisseur.

After a few moments alone the door opened, and Dora, flushed with pleasurable excitement, came forward to greet me. She was dressed in a short skirt and thick golf

jersey, and wore a tam-o'-shanter, from which I supposed she had been playing golf.

"I'm so very glad to see you, Mr. Markham!" she cried, putting out her hand.

"I wrote you some days ago to Calcot, but possibly you never got my letter. I wanted so very much to see you."

"About what?"

"About the awful affair at Radstone," she said. "I only left there the day before yesterday. I did all I could to console poor Mrs. Wentworth, but I fear it was of little avail. May was their only child, and both her parents were devoted to her."

"Has nothing further been discovered?" I asked. "I came to ask this," I added. "I chanced to be in Bournemouth to day, and called to see if you had returned home."

"What the police have found out we, of course, don't know," she said, sinking into a small well-chair. "But after you had all gone I made a very careful examination myself, and discovered one fact that renders the flight of that Italian woman all the more suspicious. It is this. On the afternoon prior to the tragedy, there came up the drive two men with a piano-organ,

and played tunes before the house. Paolina, delighted to get a chance of speaking her own language, went out, and had a long conversation with them in Italian. One was about fifty and the other twenty-seven—father and son perhaps; but of a low, evil-looking type. She gave them some money and some food from the kitchen, and after they had gone, related to us a romantic story which they had told her. They were from the Romagna—an uncle and nephew, who had come to London in search of the missing bride of the younger man, who was believed to have fled to England—and were tramping from town to town hoping to find her somewhere in one or other of the Italian colonies of our various cities. We all discussed it at dinner, forming all kinds of theories, and afterwards, out in the hall, I caught her in the act of reading something upon a scrap of blue paper." And she paused.

"Well?" I asked, "and what afterwards?"

"Just this," was her answer. "On searching poor May's room after the body was removed I found this lying screwed up on the floor behind the chest of drawers." And

placing her hand inside her jersey, she carefully drew forth the piece of paper in question.

Something was written in pencil upon it—in rather illiterate Italian, I instantly recognised.

"I have already had it translated," she said. "Read it yourself, and tell me what you think is its meaning."

I held the paper to the wintry light, and saw scrawled upon it some badly-spelt words, which, reduced to English, read:

"To-night. If you are ready."

I raised my eyes to those of my companion, without uttering a word.

What, indeed, did that mysterious message imply? Why, when it had been no doubt received in secret by Paolina, had it been cast aside in the room wherein the grim tragedy had been enacted?

CHAPTER XVIII.

EXPOSES AN UNWELCOME FACT.

SIR EDMUND HALLETT, a tall, wiry, grey-faced, grey-haired man, entered the drawing-room a few moments later, and Dora introduced her father, who, on hearing my name, at once accorded me a warm welcome.

He was a good type of the retired Indian official, courteous and easy-going, his countenance wizened by the climate and the skin of his hands brown and wrinkled.

"Dora has spoken of you a great deal," he said. "You were present at that terrible affair at Radstone. Poor girl. What an end! And the police seem entirely in the dark. It's simply monstrous," he added, "that a foreign woman, whom a single word would betray, should be able to get clear away."

I agreed with all his condemnations and all his theories without seeking to enlighten

him upon any point. He, like all the rest, held Paolina culpable, and certainly that ill-written message that Dora had shown me was in itself a very suspicious fact.

"No doubt the woman has got clear away to the Continent," he said at last, in a tone of indignation. "The police didn't commence their inquiries after her until they'd given her time to get away across the Channel. It is always the way. The authorities here are so hide-bound that they generally act too late."

I allowed him to run on in that irascible strain until I was afforded an opportunity of changing the topic of conversation. And then we began to chat, and found that in India we had mutual acquaintances. Indeed, a cousin of mine in the Woods and Forests was, I found, one of his distant relations.

This led to a closer friendship, and just before I rose to leave, he said :

"By the way, can't you return here and dine with us? I'm taking Dora afterwards to the theatre. There's a piece this week that's been a great deal talked about—*The Man of the Moment*."

Instantly it occurred to me that, as I

desired to go and see the "dead man" in his rôle of actor, it would be pleasant to go in their company.

Therefore I accepted, and, having dressed, returned and dined, afterwards driving to the theatre in the brougham.

The house was fairly well filled, and when I looked down my programme I saw the line: "Cane (valet to his Excellency the Ambassador), Mr. Henry Garthorne."

As we sat in the stalls watching the play, we found it to be an amusing comedy, the first scene of which was laid in the rooms of Colonel Ailesworth, British Military Attaché at Vienna. There was considerable humour in the situation, and the house roared with laughter at the wiles of an American widow angling after the smart attaché. It was not until the curtain rose for the second act, revealing the private study of his Excellency the British Ambassador, that "Cane," the English valet, entered with a note from the skittish widow.

"Why!" cried Dora, touching me upon the arm involuntarily. "Look! Why—Mr. Markham——"

"What?" I asked in a whisper. "I don't see anything."

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"WHAT OF HIM? . . . DO YOU KNOW HIM?"

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"No; of course not. But that man—the valet!"

"What of him?" I inquired breathlessly.
"Do you know him?"

"Yes—at least, I've seen him before. I'd know that man among ten thousand."

"But does not stage make-up disguise a man?" I suggested.

"Not sufficiently in his case," she said in a firm voice. "He is the man!"

"Where did you meet him—in what circumstances?" I asked breathlessly.

"I was in London with Mrs. Wentworth, May, and Paolina. We went up for the day to do shopping, and were looking in the windows in Regent Street. Mrs. Wentworth and May were on ahead some distance, Paolina and I having gone into Fuller's. As we were coming out, Paolina suddenly halted and drew back, white and trembling, as though she had seen a ghost. I inquired the reason, and she told me that she had recognised a man who had just passed without, however, noticing her. I also had caught sight of the man's face. He was well dressed, and presented all the appearance of a gentleman. So strangely nervous was she at sight of him, that his features

were impressed strongly upon my memory. She quickened her steps and walked on, looking back as though in fear that he might follow, and it was fully a quarter of an hour before she had recovered herself. I asked her who the man was, but she only answered, 'Someone whom I believe I know—but I'm not sure.' It was evident, however, that she was greatly in fear of him, and that the meeting was unexpected. He never raised his eyes to look at her, for he walked on quickly, his face thoughtful and serious."

"Then she gave you no information as to who he was?" I asked.

"She only said that she had once known him."

"She gave you the impression that her acquaintance with him had been fraught with bitterness?"

"Exactly. She held him in terror, without a doubt. Therefore we might from him obtain some clue to her present whereabouts. He is evidently no friend of hers."

"She made no remark?" I said. "Merely betrayed fear?"

"She held her breath, and went so pale that I thought she would faint. Her eyes glared at him as though he were an appar-

ition," she answered. "I never saw a person so absolutely stunned."

"But this man," I remarked, nodding towards the stage, "is a well-known actor. He only bears a striking likeness to the man you saw in Regent Street."

"Nevertheless, I'd like to question him regarding her," she said persistently.

"If you wish, I'll see him and question him," I said. "From the manager I can easily find out where he is lodging."

"Ah! I wish you would," she exclaimed quickly. "You are a man, and can discover the truth better than I. We must find Paolina at all hazards, whether she be innocent or guilty. And from that man I feel confident you may, if you are judicious, learn something of interest regarding her past. She knew him, and she fears him. Those two facts are already established beyond doubt."

The man known as Henry Garthorne had spoken his lines and disappeared, leaving me staring at the stage utterly confounded.

Paolina had actually seen and recognised him. She had encountered him with fear and trembling, and was, as yet, unconvinced whether he was really the man who had died

that tragic death in Florence, or only one bearing a strong facial resemblance. My theory that Bob Alderson was working in her interests to discover whether he were Fred Ingram after all seemed fully established.

All our interest in the play ceased. Several times the pretty girl at my side whispered an earnest hope that I would lose no time in meeting and questioning him. The recognition seemed to have aroused within her a fresh interest in the amazing affair. At times she appeared to view Paolina as the assassin, and at others she seemed inclined to regard her sudden disappearance only as a regrettable coincidence.

After the play I returned home with Sir Edmund and his daughter, and after a drink and cigar with the latter I left and walked down to the hotel.

"Fred!" I exclaimed as I entered his bedroom, where he was alone in his dressing-gown reading a book and awaiting me, "I have seen you. Your performance is excellent, but you've been recognised."

"By whom?" he gasped, starting up aghast.

"By Paolina."

"Paolina! She's not here—in Bourne-

mouth!" he cried, his countenance changing in an instant.

"No," I answered, and went on to explain how I had gone to the theatre with Sir Edmund and his daughter, and that the latter knew Paolina. I kept from him the fact of Paolina's residence with the Wentworths, merely explaining how Dora had recognised him on the stage as the man whom her friend had seen in Regent Street.

"She saw me!" he exclaimed. "And I never saw her! She knows, then, that I am still alive."

"Paolina only surmises it," I said. "She, like myself, would require absolute proof that you were Fred Ingram. Your appearance has altered somewhat since those days in Florence."

"And yet you recognised me in an instant," he said.

"Certainly, and so did she, it seems."

"What am I to do? This friend of yours, Dora Hallett, may write and tell her where and what I am. And she will come here and face me."

"And if she did?" I asked, gazing at my friend seriously.

There was a strange, wild look in his

eyes, while his hands slowly clenched themselves.

"If she did," he said in a low, determined voice, "then the end would come—for me." Then, with a sudden movement of fear, he turned to me, saying: "She and I must never meet, George—never! You understand?"

"No; I don't understand," I declared, much puzzled.

"Of course you don't! Ah! If I could only tell you the strange and shameful truth! But no—I dare not. You, George, are my only friend," and he took my hand in his trembling grip, and I saw that tears welled in his dark, deep-set eyes.

There was no peril of Dora telling Paolina of her discovery, and I tried to convince him of this. But as I could not reveal the whole of the facts, my arguments had no effect in allaying his apprehension.

"No," he said, with a grim smile, "the only thing to do is to leave the company, and join another under a different name. I dare not play there to-morrow night."

"But I tell you that you've nothing to fear. I have promised Miss Hallett I would see you and ascertain whether you were a

friend of Paolina. You deny ever having known any such person, and there's an end of it."

"Yes, as far as her own suspicions are concerned. But she may tell Paolina, who will at once investigate for herself." And he shook his head.

"At any rate, I shall go to Miss Hallett to-morrow, and tell her that she is mistaken—that you have never heard of the Italian woman in question."

"Go to her, of course," he said. "But to-morrow I must resign from the company and seek an engagement with another. I have but little money, but possibly you will lend me some," he added.

"Certainly," I answered. "But I don't really consider your flight at all necessary. Would it not indeed confirm Miss Hallett's suspicions if you disappeared?"

My remark at once convinced him.

"I suppose you're right," he murmured, his eyes fixed upon the fire. "It might convince them of the truth. Yes," he sighed, "I suppose I must remain in this constant peril—for a brief while, at least."

"Certainly. And in the meantime, if you think fit, you can be on the look-out for

another engagement under a different name. Then suddenly leave your present company, and join the other. Depend upon it, that such a course is by far the most judicious."

"But supposing this girl Hallett sends word to Paolina in the meantime?"

"She will not, after I have convinced her of her error," I said.

And then, in the silence that followed, as we both gazed thoughtfully into the flames, I recollected that strange message in Italian upon the scrap of paper which Dora had given me. Was it possible that those two itinerant musicians, or men disguised as such, were actually her friends and accomplices?

I remembered how cleverly Bob Alderson had become acquainted with the man before me. The object seemed quite clear. Paolina had recognised him that afternoon in Regent Street, and Bob had assisted her to make close investigation. Within myself I had no doubt but Paolina had satisfied herself that her suspicion was well-founded, and that she knew Fred was still alive. If so, and she really held this secret of his mysterious shame, then the situation was more dangerous than I had ever anticipated.

Yet my attitude towards him was one of

cheerfulness. He sat with his head sunk upon his breast in desperation and despair; but, by endeavouring to convince him that his secret was still his own, I at last managed to arouse him.

"Where is Paolina now?" he demanded, suddenly. "You told me that she was in London."

"I don't know. I haven't the slightest idea," was my lame reply.

"Ah!" he exclaimed with a bitter smile. "She is still in search of me—she knows the truth!"

CHAPTER XIX.

DEMANDS EXPLANATION.

FRED INGRAM's exclamation puzzled me. I pressed him to tell me of Paolina's whereabouts, but for some reason only known to himself he firmly refused.

"If I told you, George, you would go to her," he declared. "And through you my own identity would be revealed, if it is not known already."

I promised secrecy by everything I held most sacred, but no words of mine would induce him to reconsider his decision.

That he had discovered her hiding-place seemed to me quite plain, yet for some secret reason he intended to withhold it from me.

Could any situation be more tantalising? I desired to find her, and demand of her an explanation of her conduct in fleeing from Radstone. The stigma of a cowardly crime

was upon her, and my sole object was to establish either her innocence or her guilt.

My affection for her was not wholly dead within me, as I had hoped and believed. It still lingered, stifled, but not extinct. Yet so many were the dark suspicions now upon her that I almost felt myself justified in regarding her as others regarded her. My heart in those days of suspicion and uncertainty was torn by a thousand conflicting emotions.

At last, when by every means in my power I had endeavoured to induce him to tell me where she had concealed herself, yet in vain, I looked straight at him, saying :

"Fred, you alone know the truth—I love her !"

He drew a long breath, and slowly raised his bowed head to glance at me.

"I know, old fellow," was his low reply.

"It would have been better for you and for me too, perhaps, if you had hated her instead ?"

"Why ?"

But he shrugged his shoulders, without replying to my question.

"Why do you tell me this ?" I repeated.

"You have never spoken a single word against her before. Tell me the truth."

"How can I tell you when I don't know it myself?" he asked. "Look at me, George, broken in heart and in fortune—compelled to disguise myself, to become a strolling player, and to lead a life which nauseates and disgusts! I am 'dead'—struck down by an assassin, and yet I dare not go forward and tell the world the truth—I dare not claim either mercy or justice."

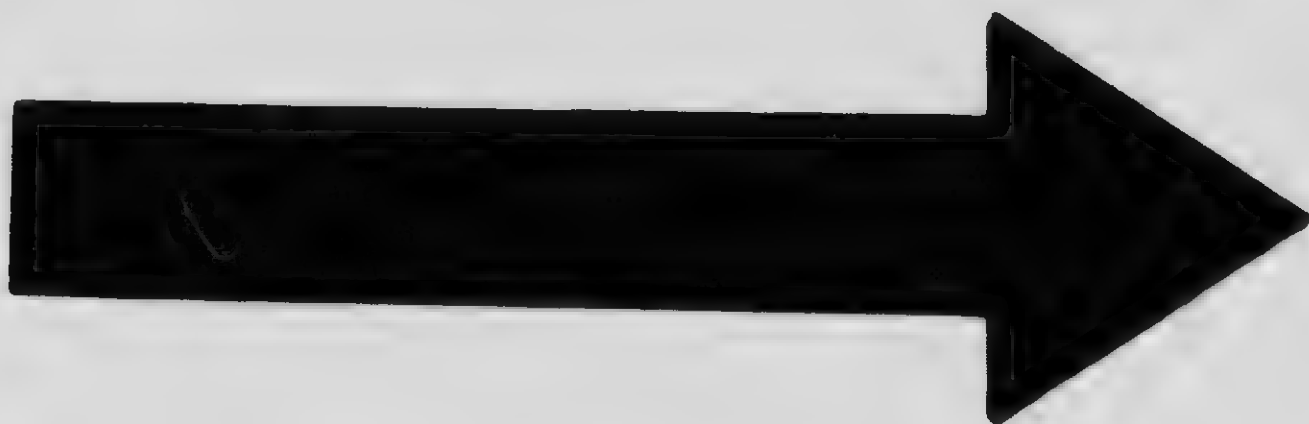
And he stared blankly at the fire, his white hands clasped in abject dejection.

"And myself!" I exclaimed hoarsely. "Think of what all the past has meant to me. I loved Paolina—loved her with that strong, fervent devotion which only comes to a man once in a lifetime. My only thought was of her. Even to-day, away in Italy, the very trees seem to speak to me of those far-back days of our youth and happiness. I can hear her rippling laughter in the mountain torrent, and her sighs in the branches overhead. My initials, entwined with hers, that I cut upon the big pine-trunk on the edge of our wood at Santa Lucia, are still there—I saw them not long

ago—distorted by the growth of the tree, but still an indelible record of our affection. To me, she——”

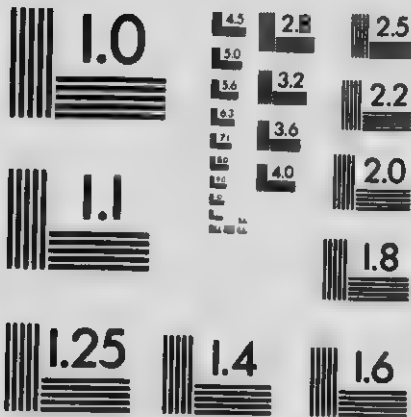
“I know,” he cried, interrupting me. “I know, George, that I am to blame. Can you ever forgive me for my actions in Florence, where I allowed you to believe that she loved me? No, I fear you never will. It was the act of an enemy; not of a friend. I admit to you that it was I myself who started the gossip which linked our names, and, although she was perfectly innocent and unconscious of it all, I purposely invited her to my apartment in order to add colour to the scandal I had started. But, believe me, I tell you I had no idea that your affection for her was so strong as it is. I merely regarded it as an acquaintanceship continued from your childhood days, otherwise I should never have acted as I did. Can you ever forgive me?”

“If you were ignorant of my love for her, Fred, I can forgive you,” was my reply after a pause, for a lump had arisen in my throat at recollection of those painful days in gay, giddy Florence, with its well-dressed crowds of wealthy idlers who throng its ancient streets in winter.



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"I swear to you I was ignorant of it all. And, moreover, I acted under compulsion," he said. "I had a reason for sacrificing my own honour by coupling her name with mine."

"But you surely did not realise what you were doing, Fred. You not only sacrificed your own honour, but you took away Paolina's good name. Before she left Florence people used to point at her as she went past and whisper among themselves that she was an adventuress?"

"And why?" he cried in sudden indignation. "Because she is beautiful, and because she knows how to dress. No, I repeat that for us both it would have been best if you had never loved her, old fellow; but I will never hear a single doubt expressed against her. We both know her better than the world; we both know what kind of woman she is—that she is honest and upright, and that she loves you."

"What makes you think that?" I asked him in quick eagerness.

"Well, when a woman loves as she does, she is not easily weaned from the object of her affection. She told me once in Florence, in a moment of confidence, that you

were the only man for whom she had ever entertained affection."

"And yet——" And I paused, hesitating whether now to tell him the whole unvarnished truth.

"Yet what?" he asked, rising and standing with his back to the fire, a tall, somewhat bent figure, hollow cheeked, and prematurely aged.

"And yet, since then, she has been engaged to be married!" I blurted forth.

"Engaged? To whom?" he demanded in surprise.

"My friend, Walter Guilford. He met her in Chicago, and invited her to England as his affianced wife."

"Guilford! But, of course, he knew nothing of the past—of the affair in Florence, I mean?" he asked quickly, utterly astounded at my words.

"Nothing. He does not even know that she and I were previously acquainted."

"Then you met her when you were down at Calcot. She did not stay there, of course?"

I replied in the negative, and then a long silence again fell between us.

He had been frank in his confession to

me, therefore I wondered whether it were policy to tell him of her stay at Radstone, and her sudden disappearance on the night of poor May's tragic end. Sooner or later he must know of it, I argued, and, as he was evidently aware of her whereabouts, the knowledge might furnish him with a key to her movements.

"You have cleared my mind, Fred, regarding those black days in Florence; therefore I will tell you some further facts which will probably surprise you. When you have heard me, I want you to give me your candid opinion," I said. And then, continuing, I related as briefly and clearly as I could Paolina's mysterious connection with the dastardly crime at Radstone.

He stood open-mouthed in amazement, but heard me to the end without uttering a word.

"Then you have established the fact that she met that fellow Alderson clandestinely on the night of the murder?" he remarked at last.

"Yes, and also that on the afternoon before the tragedy two Italians, one young and the other middle-aged, came to the Grange with an organ, and in secret handed

her a note, which declared that they were in readiness—for what was not mentioned."

His brows were knit gravely, and his lips pressed together.

"It is, as you say, George, suspicious," he remarked at last, "She may actually have killed my poor little May!"

"But do you think so? Do you believe that she is a murderess?" I cried. "You have already told me that she is innocent of that crime in Florence. May not she be innocent of this?"

"She may—but, frankly, I doubt it," was his harsh response.

"Why? Upon what do you base your doubt?"

"Upon the knowledge of a motive."

"A motive!" I gasped. "What was it? Come, Fred, you will not withhold it from me?"

For some time he made no answer. What I had told him seemed to have aroused within him a fierce vengeance against my love, and I now deeply regretted having revealed the truth to him.

"There was a motive," he declared at last. "Paolina had a motive. My love, perhaps, held a secret which she feared

might at any moment be exposed. Possibly there was a quarrel, and in sheer desperation, to save herself, Paolina committed the cowardly crime."

"You think this!" I cried, glaring at my friend. "You think that my well-beloved killed yours? If this is so, then instead of being friends, Fred, we are enemies. You will seek to hound down Paolina, while I shall endeavour to save her from the law—even if she is really guilty."

"I have no desire that it should be so," was his quiet answer, in a voice of reproach. "I only tell you that Paolina holds secret knowledge of a ghastly truth. I can easily imagine that her fear might lead her to any extremity."

"You think she killed May because she feared lest the secret be divulged?"

"Perhaps so. And perhaps it was because May refused to divulge something which it was to Paolina's interest to know. The working of a woman's mind is often utterly unreasonable."

"Then, speaking perfectly frankly, you believe that she is the culprit?" I said, facing him suddenly.

"In the light of all the evidence, as well

as in that of the circumstances of which I alone am aware, I regret that I can come to no other conclusion," was his low, serious response.

"And yet, Fred, you are my friend," I said bitterly. "You condemn her!"

"No, you mistake me!" he exclaimed quickly. "I only suspect her."

"Then, if so, why not let us go to her together and demand the truth? She could not tell us a lie."

"Me! Go to her? Reveal myself? Why, you're mad, my dear fellow! I have already told you that she must never know that I am still living."

"But it seems that she does know—she has seen you."

"I admit that. And for that very reason I must leave here and hide myself. If I join another dramatic company she will no doubt find me. I must adopt another disguise and means of livelihood."

"I can't understand this extraordinary fear you have of her," I said, much puzzled. "If, as you think, she is really guilty of the crime at Radstone, then is she not, in all probability, in hiding from you? Indeed, you yourself said so."

"She may be. But, even if we met, it would be useless."

"Why, useless? You know where she is living, therefore you can at least take me to her, or give me her address. I must see her, and learn the truth from her own lips. Act boldly, and come with me. There is no time for delay. You believe she is still in London. If she is in fear, she's no doubt only awaiting her opportunity to escape to the Continent."

"And run straight into the arms of the police," he added. "Remember, she is still wanted for the affair in Florence."

"I know. The constabulary have her photograph, and, being Italian, they will no doubt compare it with the portrait with which Zoli, of Florence, supplied Scotland Yard. By this time her description is circulated all over Europe."

"Then the moment she sets foot in France, or Belgium, or Germany, she'll find herself arrested."

"But you surely will not allow her to risk that!" I cried. "Remember that she is innocent of the crime in Florence of which the police have condemned her."

"Yes," he said, deeply thoughtful, "she is innocent, and I am the only person who can prove her innocence. She is aware of that. She believed me to be dead—that I could not be a witness in her favour—and therefore she fled."

"And yet you will allow them to arrest her for an offence that she never committed," I said reproachfully. "Remember, Fred, she is mine—I love her! I implore you to spare her—for my sake!"

He looked at me fixedly for some moments, his dark eyes full of grief and bitterness. Then, at last, he answered:

"How can I reappear as witness in her favour, when to do so would be to court a further disaster and a dishonourable end? No, George, old fellow, you ask me to do an impossibility. You ask me to meet her with you face to face, and demand the truth of the tragedy at Radstone. But place yourself for a moment in my invidious and perilous position."

"I cannot see the peril," I remarked, not quite following him.

"Why, can't you see that if I admitted my identity to her she would at once hold me within her hand? And, even though

she were guilty of poor little May's death, I dare not denounce her ! ”

“ Why not ? ”

“ Because my own honour is at stake,” he said, drawing himself up suddenly. “ I may be a broken, homeless wanderer, without money, without name, or even legal right to exist, yet I pride myself that I am still the head of a house that has ever been honoured—that I am still a gentleman ! ”

CHAPTER XX.

IN WHICH MANY THINGS HAPPEN.

How often in my day-dreams I lived again through those nights in golden June in Tuscany, and heard again those old *canzonette* which my dainty little love used so often to sing to me to the accompaniment of her mandoline as we sat together on the big marble terrace before the old villa :

"O bello mio adorabile
Svenire in se mi par. . . .
Vorrei fuggir rapida,
Non so come mi far !"

I remembered how, as she sang, the moon rose in the tender sky, and the fireflies sparkled in the dark olive groves below us. Ah, yes. All came back to me, so vividly, so often—so very often. There, in that busy work-a-day world of London, with the wide sea parting the present from the past, I dreamed ever of the red flower she so often

wore in her breast, of our evening wanderings hand in hand, and of her soft, tender responses in Italian to my own outpourings. Her heart in those long-past days was mine, with a love both deep and great. And through brightness and shadow, in fortune and in despair, I had remembered her always, although she was a fugitive criminal accused of murder, and as far from me as earth from Heaven above.

Did she remember those days? Yes; I knew she did; for had she herself not referred to them? Did she not still carry the cheap little trinket I had given her?

Therefore, can you blame me for indulging in those dreams of that peaceful, idyllic past? Every man and every woman, of whatever grade or station, retains a tender recollection of youthful days, those days long since dead, the recollections of which are rendered far sweeter and more dearly cherished by the fact that a mutual love had a share in them.

We each of us retain a sweet memory of those days of fond affection, which in our youthful inexperience we thought would last always. But how bitter the truth! How cruel the awakening!

I had satisfied Dora Hallett that the insignificant actor was ignorant of any such person as Paolina Delfino, and I had made a flying visit to both Radstone and Calcot. At the house of mourning I heard, what I had already read in the papers, that the coroner's jury had attributed the crime to "some person or persons unknown"; and at Calcot I found Walter brooding and disconsolate. He had been in London in search of me but I explained that I had been down to Bournemouth in ignorance of his attempt to find me.

I remained there one night only, and my position was a serious one, compelled to sympathise with him upon the loss of my own love. He had a cousin with him, a clever youth, just down from Oxford; but the evening I spent in that well-remembered smoking-room was the reverse of cheerful, and I was glad enough when next morning I wished them good-bye and drove to Elton station.

Paolina was in London, and my sole aim at the moment was to find her. Fred seemed to know her whereabouts, but from him I could obtain no assistance. His fears of her were deep-rooted and mysterious.

Try how I would, I could see no motive for it, nor could I conceive what great shame could hold him in such terror. She could make a revelation which he dare not face. That was all he would tell me—all the explanation he would give.

I drove to the Constitutional Club and took a room, and later in the afternoon found Bob Alderson smoking in the big upstairs room of the Travellers' Club, having failed to meet him at the Sports.

He sprang up to greet me as I entered, and I saw that he was in the approved town kit of frock-coat and patent-leather boots.

"I've been searching everywhere," he said in a low voice as we sank together upon the long leather lounge, "but I can't discover Paolina. Have you heard anything?"

I shook my head in the negative, saying:

"Probably the police are sparing no effort to trace her. If they are unsuccessful, how can we hope to find her? But tell me, Bob," I added very seriously, "have you really not seen her since your meeting at the Croughton cross-roads?"

"No," he answered, rather hesitatingly, I thought.

"You admit that your object in meeting her there was a secret one?"

"Certainly. I wished to see her—to tell her something."

"What was it? Surely you know me well enough to be aware that I shall respect your confidence?"

"My dear old fellow," he said, removing the cigar from his lips and looking at me, "didn't I tell you the other day that the secret is Paolina's, and I cannot divulge it without her sanction? To be candid," he added, "I don't know why you are so persistently following her."

"To convict her or to establish her innocence," I said, rising.

"Why not leave that to the police? It is their affair—and Guilford's, not yours."

His words aroused within me a distinct suspicion. Why did he desire me to relinquish my search? What did he fear? Was it possible that, after all, he was aware of my love's hiding-place?

On leaving him I walked towards Charing Cross, filled with regret. Why had I ever doubted Paolina when in that room at the

Metropole at Brighton she had declared her innocence of the crime in Florence? I knew now, when it was too late, that, notwithstanding the confession of a gaol-bird, she was not guilty. But I had forsaken her. I had allowed myself to doubt her, and had permitted Walter Guilford to regard her as his future wife.

Had she ever loved him? This all-important question I found extremely difficult to answer. I recollected that from her humble station in the American city where she had concealed her identity, he had brought her to England and offered her marriage, and eventually a countess's coronet. In her position—poor, friendless, and accused of a crime of which she was innocent—could she resist the peace, prosperity, and personal security offered her? No. No woman could. But whether she had entertained a spark of real affection for him was quite another matter.

I remembered her words on that summer's evening in Brighton, and the recollection caused me to wonder whether, after all, her love for me had been as strong and devoted as mine.

There were suspicions, dark suspicions

which must naturally arise when a man and a woman have been long parted. But Fred's declaration regarding her had placed her in an entirely new light. I had believed her worthless until now, when too late I found that I, with the rest of the world, had sorely misjudged her.

Ah! how I longed to look again into those dark, brilliant, fathomless eyes, the expression of which was soft and tender as a child! How I sighed to again hear her sweet sibilant Italian with the slight aspirate of the c's, so peculiarly Florentine; to hear her call me *adorato* and *tesoro*, and to feel again her hot, passionate kisses upon my lips. I remembered how she used to tramp about the hills in pelting rain without an umbrella in order that the rain might beat upon her face, dressed in a short skirt and thick boots, and laughing from the very joy of living.

And yet even Fred himself held a distinct suspicion that she might be the actual perpetrator of the affair at Radstone. There was, he said, a motive for the crime!

Such thought, however, I stifled down as I went eastward towards the Strand. No; I loved her. To me, therefore, was the

task of either condemning her or of establishing her innocence.

Now that the man believed to be dead still lived to convince me that my estimate of her in those days in Florence had been entirely wrong, my fierce passionate love for her had been rekindled. She was mine, still mine.

Slowly the dark, dreary days dragged by. December came, cold, rainy, and dismal in London, and although I spared no effort to find my love, yet all was in vain. Believing that the Italian proprietor of the house in Burton Crescent might possibly be acquainted with her, I took rooms for a week at the house in order to become on friendly terms with the crafty old Sicilian, but from the first I was convinced that he was ignorant of her existence. I even offered him a good round sum to tell me where she was, but he confessed his inability.

From Dora I obtained descriptions of the two itinerant musicians, yet so vague were they that they did not assist me in the least. Times without number I had begged Fred Ingram to tell me of Paolina's hiding-place. I had followed him to Leeds, to Sheffield, to Newcastle, to Hull, and to other towns,

where the company fulfilled their engagements, and saw the life he led of weary, comfortless travelling, squalid lodgings, precarious meals—a daily life without decency, religion, peace, or reward.

He refused me all information regarding her, because he was in fear of the revelations she might make concerning himself.

Argument was of no avail.

"The day she meets me I shall take my own life," he said, with a desperation which convinced me that his threat was no idle one. "Therefore, George, if you do not wish to be my murderer, you will allow things to remain as they are."

"But think—I love her!" I cried. "Think what this means to me!"

"Think what my life is to me!" he said hoarsely, as he stood in his dingy lodging in a noisy back street near the Tyneside. "True, I have not much to live for," he added, with a bitter smile, "life is dear—even to me. I am striving, and hoping, to yet extricate myself."

The matter did not admit of argument, so I had once again taken train back to London, weary and heart-broken. My best friend, the man who had been to me almost

as a brother, accepted no promise of mine, and was distrustful lest I might play him false and reveal that he still lived, although legally "dead."

From Bob Alderson, from Walter Guilford, or from the Wentworths I could obtain no single clue. I travelled down to Northampton and saw Blackman, who shook his head when I made inquiry, and said :

"Between ourselves, Mr. Markham, she got too long a start of us. She'd crossed the Channel and got away before we sent notice to the detectives at the ports of embarkation. She's safely back in her own country by this time, depend upon it."

"Then you have no hope of ever finding her?" I said deeply disappointed.

"A very small one, sir," admitted the police superintendent. "There is a suspicion at Scotland Yard that she's wanted for an offence in Italy, but of the details of that I've had no account. They seem to have had her description furnished by the Italian police, together with a photograph."

"Among the incidents at Radstone prior to the tragedy was the visit there of two men, evidently Italians, playing a piano-

organ," I said. "It seems that the missing lady spoke to them."

"So I heard," he said. "But I don't attach any importance to them. There are lots of itinerant Italians on the road. We have quite a number of them living here, in Northampton."

"I suppose there's no means by which we could discover the names of those men?" I asked.

"Well, curiously enough, in the course of my inquiries about them I found that on the previous day they had left their organ unattended for over an hour in the main street of Blisworth, and the constable took their names and addresses in order to summon them for an obstruction. The summonses were issued, but never served, as they could not be found at the address given in Oxford, where, as perhaps you know, there is quite a large colony of poor Italians."

"Could you get the names for me?"

"Certainly; I'll wire to Blisworth. In half an hour I shall be able to let you have them."

"Tell them to be careful in the spelling, as the alteration of a letter makes a great difference in an Italian surname," I urged,

and presently left the police office, promising to return later.

When I did so the superintendent handed me a slip of paper bearing the reply :

"The elder man was Domenico Valio, and the other Ignazio Perelli. Their names were copied from their papers, which they produced to the constable. Address given in Oxford, was false."

"And you believe they were in no way associated with the crime?" I asked, recollecting that Dora had not shown him the scrap of paper she had found.

"I think not. They disappeared because they feared a fine—at least, that's my opinion."

Back to London I carried the slip of paper, and in my room at the club sat for a long time wondering how best to act. Among the many thousands of Italians scattered in the poorer quarters of every English town, the search seemed hopeless; nevertheless, one course suggested itself to me. With the elder man Valio, I did not for the moment concern myself. But I recollected that over young Italian immigrants the Italian Government watches with a paternal eye, and that, although in England,

each young man on attaining the legal age for conscription is compelled to report himself at the Consulate-General, and to undergo medical examination at the hands of an Italian doctor resident in London. The weakly and deformed are given their exemption from military service, but those who are healthy and able not only sons are registered as liable to be called at the next drawing, while they are compelled to leave a permanent address to which notice may be sent. And if they do not respond they are gazetted as deserters, and return to Italy on pain of arrest.

As the Italians are perhaps the most patriotic race in all Europe and as it is the aim of every itinerant musician, or vendor of roasted chestnuts or ice-cream to return to his native country, set up a small shop, or farm a small *podere* upon his savings, the evasions of the military service are comparatively few. Therefore it occurred to me that if Perelli had been in England for a year or two, as was most likely, he had passed through the Consulate-General in Finsbury Square.

Next morning I was closeted with my old friend the Cavaliere Pietro Righi, the

Italian Vice-Consul, the kindly, soft-spoken friend and adviser of many a poor Italian in London, and withal a very eminent member of the consular corps. He was short, dark, of middle-age, and, as he sat at his table, looked a typical Italian official. Before I began, he offered me one of his long Toscanos, those thin cigars so dear to the Italian palate; and when we had got our weeds fairly alight, and he had asked many questions about our mutual friends in Italy, I told him of my quest.

Presently he called the Italian clerk whose duty it was to interview the young men who presented themselves for registration, and the huge registers were taken down and examined.

At first our search was fruitless, but after a quarter of an hour or so, my friend the Vice-Consul pointed to an entry gleefully, and exclaimed in Italian, which we always spoke when we met :

"Look ! Here you are—Perelli, Ignazio, son of Giovanni. Born at Asciano, Province of Siena. Apparently the doctor passed him three years ago last April."

Then, on referring to a second register, the Vice-Consul added :

"His address in Italy he gave in the city of Siena, Piazza Tolomei, No. 14, top floor; but he apparently stated that he intended to go to work in Brussels, as the notice calling him for service is to be sent to 38, Rue Madame, Brussels."

"There are no other details?" I asked, looking at the bald entry of the addresses in the book.

"None," was my friend's answer. "That is as far as our information carries us."

Brussels! I recollected that flying visit to Brussels which Bob Alderson had made. To Brussels I would go in search of the young compatriot who had slipped that mysterious note into Paolina's hand.

Therefore I thanked the Cavaliere most heartily, shook his hand, and took my leave, travelling that same night by way of Dover and Ostend, and arriving in the Belgian capital next morning.

Thorough-going cosmopolitan that I was, I knew Brussels well. Indeed, since I had succeeded to my inheritance, I travelled constantly each summer. I had drifted from capital to capital, from spa to bad, and from *no* to *kursaal*, over the greater part of Europe. I had been in Brussels

a dozen times ; I had watched its improvements in the Rue Royal and the central boulevards, and was as much at home there as in Paris, or London, or Rome. Therefore after a wash and an early breakfast at the "Grand" I set out for the Rue Madame, which, from a map in the hotel, I found was a small, unfashionable thoroughfare facing the canal, not far from the Leopold station.

The morning milk-trucks drawn by big brown dogs, which always strike the stranger to Belgium, were the most common objects of the long, wide boulevard as I walked along, and the air being keen and frosty, I buttoned up my top coat to the throat. Why, I wondered, had Bob Alderson made that flying visit there if not in connection with Paolina ? For more than three weeks I had been steadily travelling hither and thither, but until the present, had gained no clue which might lead me to the woman I loved.

I was following one which, faint though it was I hoped would eventually conduct me to a knowledge of the truth. Yet the address was, I remembered, one which had been given three years ago.

After many turns and a few inquiries I suddenly found myself upon the canal bank, passing before a row of high, many-windowed houses, each with dilapidated sun-shutters, painted a uniform dusty grey.

The house of which I was in search differed in no way from its neighbours, but in the doorway I saw two women gossiping.

"Pardon, mesdames, but can you inform me if there is an Italian living in this house?" I inquired politely in French.

The elder of the two women, who probably worked in the market close by, eyed me for a moment, and then responded in her Belgian *patois*:

"Italian! Yes. There's a whole colony of them up on the third floor—and a nice lot they are, m'sieur—always fighting and knifing each other. But the 'Maccaronis' pay their rent, so the old Jew who owns our place won't turn them out. I wish he would."

"Maccaroni" was, I knew, the abusive epithet bestowed upon an Italian of the lower class in Paris as well as in Brussels.

"You don't know their names I suppose?"

"Names? *Dieu, m'sieur!* They all end

in 'i' or 'o,' and they most of them have a 'z' in them. They get a lazy living with organs and monkeys. People say that they only spend four sous a day for food, and save the rest."

"How many of them are there?" I asked

"Oh, six or seven—men and women! They have what they call a *padrone*, and he gives them food and lodging. They hire their organs from him. He's worth a lot of money, they say."

I asked if they had ever heard the name of Perelli, or of Valio, but both shook their heads, declaring that Italian names were worse than Walloon, far too difficult to remember.

As I was speaking I heard a man descending the stairs whistling gaily the old love-song of the *contadini* of the vineyards:—

"Quando l'amor tradito
Contai con preferenza."

He was a dark, swarthy, middle-aged fellow, with a red kerchief around his throat, his soft felt hat askew, and a small monkey nestling within his coat. His black eyes gave me a quick, inquisitive glance as he passed out, perhaps to get his piano

and to go forth into the boulevards, or to tramp the country to earn his daily bread.

Our eyes met but for a single instant. Yet in that second the gay, careless song died from his lips, and next moment he had brushed by me and vanished, leaving me standing breathless, amazed, aghast.

He was not the young conscript of whom I was in search, but a person whom I believed I should never again meet—Enrico Gallotti, a waiter at Giacosa's, in Florence, who used frequently to serve me in the old days, but who, I had heard, owing to the elopement of his wife, a young and giddy woman, had suddenly taken himself off, no one knew where. He was *in estero*, they had said; but in Italian *estero* means any place outside one's native province.

He had, it seemed, fallen upon evil times, and had degenerated into an itinerant musician.

That curious clue given me by Dora Hallett was, as you will learn, destined to lead me to a truth that was far stranger than even my wildest dreams.

I was prepared for any inexplicable facts, and mystery in its most inscrutable form, now that I had resolved upon a straight

and unswerving course of action, but I certainly never bargained for the bewildering discovery that I was destined to make—a discovery which upset every theory that I had formed, and which rendered the truth more than ever appalling, and still more inscrutable.

I admit that the staggering truth was of my own seeking. Had I known all that my persistence meant, I should perhaps have taken Fred Ingram's advice, and let matters rest as they were.

But I loved Paolina—ah, yes, I loved her!

So I dashed out of the doorway, and followed the man who had just made his exit.

CHAPTER XXI.

TAKES ME DUE SOUTH.

HALFWAY along the canal bank I caught up to the Italian, and addressed him by name, when he turned quickly, faced me in surprise, and then, across his sun-tanned face, there suddenly spread a look of recognition

"Why? Ah! excuse me, Signor Comendatore, but I did not recognise you," he exclaimed in Italian.

"I knew you in a moment, Enrico!" I said. "And so you have forsaken your old profession, and adopted a new one?"

"Ah, yes, signore," he sighed sadly. "There are too many Italian waiters abroad. Here, and in France, they prefer Frenchmen. Only in England is there room for us, but unfortunately I do not speak English, and so I am compelled to earn my living with an organino. It is hard, but, after

all, one has liberty to fresh air and change of scene, and *Dio!* what more does one want?"

In the days gone past he had been a smartly-dressed, rather superior man, well known to those regular idlers at Giacosa's, the young Florentine counts, marquises, or other nobles who take their *piccolo*, their cocktails, or their vermouth and bitter from eleven till mid-day, or from four to six, at that fashionable pastrycook's in the Via Tornabuoni. And yet he was now satisfied with the life of a wandering musician.

He wore an air of sadness now that we spoke of the past, and, walking at his side, I noticed how worn and shabby were his clothes, and how laboured his gait by the constant dragging of the instrument over miles and miles of those flat, muddy Belgian roads.

"Yes," he said presently. "The padrone here is always fair to me; but then he is a Toscano," he added with a smile; "not like some of those gallows-birds from Naples. We Tuscans may be quick and hot-tempered and use the knife sometimes, but at least we are honest. The world knows that."

Oh, yes, he had been in Paris, he told me,

He had tramped all the way from Lyons up to Paris with his piano, and from there on to Liège. He had worked all through Holland and Belgium, over hundreds and hundreds of miles of road, from village to village, from town to town, just as the seasons and his own inclinations suited. Then, by good fortune, he had been able to sell his organ to a man in Antwerp at the same price he had given for it in Lyons. The money, two hundred and eighty francs, he had sent home to Italy to put with his other savings, and now he had gone to work for a padrone in order to try and save sufficient to purchase another organino. Why had he sold his instrument? Well, he would tell me the truth in confidence. He could not get on with his young partner Ignazio.

"And who is Ignazio?" I asked quickly, pricking my ears.

"A Sienese," he answered. "His name is Perelli. I knew him slightly in Florence, and we joined as partners in Lyons. But you know the Sienesi!" he added, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Is he here in Brussels?" I inquired quickly.

"He worked here until a few months

ago. He had learnt electricity in Siena, and when we parted in Antwerp he lived with my padrone and became an electrical engineer on the tramways. Then, after a time, he went to England with a fellow-workman named Valio, and was away about six months. A few weeks ago, however, while I was playing on the Boulevard Anspach, I saw him better dressed than I've ever before seen him, walking with a lady and gentleman—English, I think they were."

"Was the man Perelli fair or dark? Describe him."

"Why, Signor Commendatore? What interest can you have in Ignazio? Let me tell you," he said, dropping his voice, "the young scoundrel is a member of the Camorra, and not the sort of person for you to be acquainted with. You, who know Italy, know the dangers of such friendship."

"I'm not his friend, Enrico," I said. "Indeed, I've never set eyes upon the fellow in all my life. It is his friends who interest me. What was the Englishman like?"

"Not tall—not as tall as the signore is—fair, blue eyes, yellow moustache, and rather stout. He wore a blue suit like all the English who travel, and a grey felt hat."

The description was that of Bob Alderson—it was he, without a doubt.

“And the woman?”

“She was tall and dark, evidently a lady. But she wore a thick black veil with big velvet spots, so I could not see her features distinctly, except that she was pretty. She was well-dressed, even rather too well-dressed for an Englishwoman, I thought. But,” he added apologetically, “I have never been to England, and have never seen the English in their own land. But oh! signore, I do remember having seen some strange Englishwomen, thin as toothpicks, in Firenze. We used to have at Giacosa’s some curious people over from the Agence Cook, over the way, to drink vermouth, and sometimes that horrible spirit they call ‘geen’—‘otom.’”

“Are they still in Brussels, do you think?”

“He is not, for he returned to Italy by way of Bâle and Milan three days afterwards. I think, too, that the gentleman and lady also left by the same train.”

“For Italy?”

“Ah, that I don’t know. The lady stayed at the Hotel Belle Vue, for I saw her come out of there one morning. I only saw the

Englishman once, on that occasion in the Boulevard."

Could it really have been Paolina ?

As it happened, I had often stayed at the Belle Vue, the big, handsome hotel in the upper part of the city, and the head concierge had more than once received tips from me. Therefore, on making inquiries, I learnt without much difficulty that Paolina had stayed there in the name of Berta Barbensi. An Englishman, he said, came to see her once or twice, and used to sit and chat to her in the hall. He dined with her in the restaurant one evening—a rather stout, fair gentleman. When she left she had a tailor-made costume unfinished, and she had ordered it to be forwarded to "Signorina Barbensi, p^{re}so Signora Perelli, Piazza Tolomei, 14, Siena, Italy." I decided, therefore, that at all hazards I must follow the gown, and by that means alone could I discover my well-beloved.

From gay, busy Brussels, with its Bois and its boulevards in imitation of Paris, southward to the quiet, ancient city of Siena, the sleepy town of the wonderful towers and ponderous palaces, is a very

far cry. But, constant traveller that I had become, distance was never any object to me, and I found myself on the following night in the over-heated wagon-lit, travelling by way of Luxembourg to Bâle, and three days later alighted at the station of Siena and drove on to the Hôtel de Sienne, that old-fashioned hostelry facing the Lizza, or public garden, where years ago I had once stayed with my father, and where I recollected we had been comfortable.

From the street a wide flight of red-carpeted stairs led up to the bureau on the first floor of the big, old palazzo which had been turned into an hotel ; and, as I ascended them, followed by a porter with my traps, I saw a man standing with his hat a trifle askew and his hands in his trousers pockets, looking down at me. He wore gold spectacles, and had the appearance of a German commercial traveller.

It was the great secret agent of police, the man whose name was feared by every evil-doer throughout the length and breadth of the Italian kingdom—Pietro Zoli !

Why was he there, I wondered.

"Ah, Signor Markham," he cried, laughing at me through his spectacles. "I

thought you were far away—in *estero*. What brings you to Siena ? ”

“ Business,” I responded briefly, still in wonder.

“ Ah ! ” he exclaimed, dropping his voice to a low, half-whisper, and looking at me strangely. “ The same business, perhaps, as my own—eh ? Come up to my room. I want to talk with you.”

“ Well,” he exclaimed, when he had closed behind me the door of the big front bedroom overlooking the Lizza, “ you are certainly the very last man I expected to meet here ; but, no doubt, you are here for the same purpose as myself—to discover a certain lady. Do you recollect, my friend, what I told you when I dined with you up at your villa ? You asked me a simple question, and I answered it.”

“ You told me that Paolina was guilty of the affair in the Piazza,” I said. “ But I have since discovered that she is innocent.”

“ Oh ! ” he exclaimed, with a smile. “ That is certainly news to me. But, of course, I had forgotten that you were once in love with her.”

“ Yes, and am in love with her still ! ” I exclaimed frankly. “ My affection re-

mains as strong as ever until her guilt be proved."

"Which, I believe, will be at a date not far distant," was his answer.

"You are here to arrest her!" I gasped, facing him quickly.

"To make inquiries, and, if necessary, to arrest," was his quiet answer, as he stood with his hands behind his back near one of the long windows. "Since our last meeting you have seen her in England, I understand, and something has occurred—a tragedy. From your English police I have received full details of the affair, with an urgent request for her arrest. Pardon my frankness, Signor Markham; I know it must pain you, but affairs of this kind are my profession, you know. To me it is quite plain that the motive of the young Englishwoman was either jealousy or to preserve some secret—probably the latter. And the Signorina is no doubt the culprit. Her movements afterwards show me that she is in deadly fear of arrest."

It was the same theory as had been advanced by Fred—the same that I entertained deep in the recesses of my own heart, although I would not admit it to myself.

"Your English police found that on the night in question she met by appointment a young Englishman, and next night took train for Weymouth and crossed by steamer to Jersey, and thence to Carteret. In Brussels a day or two later she was rejoined by the Englishman, who is apparently her accomplice; and then she left direct for Italy. The English police traced her to Brussels, but arrived after she had left. Therefore they communicated with me, and, after many inquiries, I discovered only yesterday that she had come to Siena. Therefore I came here also."

"And what have you discovered?" I asked breathlessly, for I saw in what imminent peril my love now was of arrest.

"Oh, she's acting the innocent, as usual," he laughed, blinking through his spectacles. "Working as a milliner with this woman Perelli on the top floor of a house in the Piazza Tolomei, and entirely in ignorance of my presence here."

My own friend, the man I had known ever since my youth, was there to wreck my future life, to tear from me the woman I loved—aye, better than my own life.

Suddenly a suggestion occurred to me.

"I listen, Zoli," I said, in as firm a voice as I could control; "we are friends of long standing. You were my father's friend. I know that you are here to do your duty, even though it pains you. I have told you a fact—a truth—that Paolina is innocent of the crime which the Frenchman attributed to her. One day, ere long, I will prove it to you—in such a manner that you will be astounded. At present, however, I am not permitted; therefore I only think of the affair in England, and how to clear her of the stigma upon her. Will you not allow me to meet her alone and speak with her? To me she will tell more than to you, remember. I will urge her to tell me the truth, to reveal to me the whole circumstances. I dare say she goes out at night to take the air."

He shook his head gravely, replying:

"Ah! She is far too clever to tell you everything. You love her, Signor George. She knows that, and she will be able to mislead you in any manner she desires."

"But I should not love her if I were not convinced of her innocence," I cried. "I want to prove it to you. Once arrested, she will never be able to free herself. You yourself know how very difficult it is

for a prisoner to establish innocence before the Assize Court. You have a reputation for humanity, and for giving the suspected person the benefit of the doubt. Will you not help me in this," I begged of him, "in this the greatest crisis of my life?"

To my appeal he was silent for a long time. Apparently he feared that as soon as I revealed myself to Paolina she might make good her escape. Within himself he was, I knew, quite confident of her guilt, and pitied me for my blind affection for her. He again stroked his beard, standing with his eyes fixed away across the sunny gardens to the old red-brown façade of San Domenico.

"I know—I know!" he exclaimed at last in a changed voice. "I know, Signor Markham, how you must have suffered. You love her, therefore you, of course, believe her innocent. It is only natural, for love can see no fault and know no law. It is fate, I suppose," he sighed, "that you should become so fascinated by this woman that she should be able to convince you of her innocence, when——"

"But I implore you to help me!" I cried, interrupting him. "Without your aid I can do nothing. You may take

her from me—you may separate us for ever ! ”

“ Well,” he said, with seeming reluctance as he turned his keen blue eyes upon me, “ my duty is to arrest her, but I have, it is true, also a duty towards you, my friend. If you will give me your word of honour that she shall not escape, I will allow you to meet her alone—once again, and only once.”

“ She shall not escape,” I assured him eagerly. “ Indeed, you may place your agents near us, if you wish. I must hear her version of the affair—she must tell me. I will compel her to establish her own innocence.”

Then, with great reluctance, he consented.

Dinner over that evening, he excused himself and went out, probably to the Questura, for I had no doubt that my love was being watched by the local detectives. He offered me no explanation, however, on his return. He merely said in a low voice :

“ You had better go at nine o'clock to the Piazza and see whether she comes forth. She generally goes out alone and crosses into the Lizza, which is unfrequented at

that hour, so that she can take air and exercise without risk of being recognised."

It was then half-past eight; therefore, in keen anxiety as to whether she would appear, I went forth into the bright, clear night, and walked up the long, narrow, half-deserted street to the small square before the grim old palace of the Tolomei.

On arrival I noticed a ragged old man lounging in the shadow at the opposite corner, smoking a pipe. He glanced across at me inquiringly, and I knew instinctively that he was an agent of police, and that, in all probability, the house in question was being watched night and day, and reports regularly furnished to the quiet, kindly-mannered "German" who was my fellow-guest at the hotel.

I lounged up and down, but after my first appearance the watcher took no notice, for another loungee had joined him, and they were gossiping.

The quiet mediæval streets are not too well lighted; therefore, having decided which route Paolina would take to reach the Lizza, that small public garden where the military band plays each afternoon, I found a dark corner

in the Via Cavour, where I could watch anyone emerging from the little square. The shops were closed, and few people were now astir, for the peaceful Sanese retire early to bed in winter, when it is too chilly to sit outside their houses and chatter. The hour of nine passed, but without sign of her. For a woman to walk out alone at that hour was against all ideas of Sanese respectability; yet it seemed as though in her desperation Paolina disregarded them. She wanted air and liberty, if only for an hour each day, stifled as I supposed she was in the small top rooms of that big old house in which she had hidden herself.

I glanced at my watch, and saw it was almost ten. The two men were still standing together at the corner, talking and gesticulating as though in eager argument, and I had almost begun to give up all hope when of a sudden the tall, dark figure of a female, in a large black hat, thick veil, and a cape about her shoulders, came swiftly round the corner in my direction.

By her swinging gait and easy, graceful carriage I recognised her instantly, although unable to discern her countenance. Crossing the roadway she turned into the maze of

dark, narrow lanes that led to the open *viale* of the public garden.

In eager haste I followed her, but at such a distance that the sound of my footsteps in those silent streets should not alarm her, and presently found myself out in the great open space upon the edge of the city, with the few gas-lamps shining before the darkness of the garden beyond.

In front of me the figure quickly crossed the wide road which gave entrance to the broad, leafy *passeggiata*, where the noble Sanese drove and walked in the winter sunshine; therefore, quickening my pace, I struck off at a sharp angle by which to encounter her soon after she entered the deserted avenue.

That moment was full of excitement. Its recollection will ever live within my memory. My whole future and hers depended upon how she received me. I knew, too, that unseen eyes were watching.

My light tread fell upon her ear as I hurried up behind her, and halting, she turned, as though hesitating to go further into the silence and gloom, fearing, perhaps, the undesirables who lurked there at night.

Next instant, however, I was at her side, uttering her name.

"Paolina!"

With a harsh cry of recognition that rang out into the night, he drew back from me.

"You, George!" she gasped hoarsely.

"You—you—of all men!"

"Yes," I said in a low, serious voice, laying my hand tenderly upon her arm. "I am here, Paolina, to learn the truth—to aid you! Do you not know what deadly peril you are in? The police have found you—they are watching you!"

"The police!" she cried in blank desperation, and I saw how nervous she was. "They have found me! Then—then I have been betrayed!" she cried bitterly.

And, shrinking beneath my touch, she swayed forward, and would have fallen had I not swiftly linked my arm in hers.

CHAPTER XXII.

SHOWS THE DEPTH OF CUNNING.

IN the gloom I stood there beneath the trees with my love locked within my arms. Our hearts, so wide asunder, beat in unison.

Her breath came and went quickly, and she seemed near fainting; but in a few moments, with a great effort, she recovered herself, glancing hither and thither, nervous and apprehensive, twisting her veil tightly beneath her chin. What I had revealed to her regarding the police caused her to fear arrest, therefore I tenderly assured her that for the present she had nothing whatever to fear.

"Why did you escape with Bob Alderson?" I asked a moment later.

"Ah! then it is he who has betrayed me—eh?" she asked quickly, in a hard voice. "He has told you!"

"He has told me nothing, except that he met you at the Croughton cross-roads,"

I said. "He refused to explain anything else. But why have you come here?" I demanded. "Why not tell me the whole truth, and let me clear you? Why did you fly from England without seeking me? Why did you prefer the aid of Alderson?"

"I did not prefer it," she said quickly. "I was forced by necessity."

"But you had some secret communication with him before—before the affair at Radstone," I said.

"I do not deny that, George; why should I deny anything to you?" was her faltering reply. And, glancing back, I saw the figure of a man silhouetted against the light—one of the watchful agents of Pietro Zoli.

"Then why not explain to me that terrible circumstance—the death of poor May Wentworth?" I asked gravely.

"I cannot," she answered, in a voice scarcely above a whisper, and I felt her trembling from head to foot.

"But you must!" I cried. "Whatever secret you may hold, you must reveal it to me, Paolina, be it innocent or guilty."

"I was alone, and Mr. Alderson acted as my friend and benefactor—that was all," she declared. "Walter's love for me has

brought upon me this disaster. It is the end of a broken life. Let them arrest me; let them do their worst. For me, the future is utterly hopeless."

"Why? Surely you can prove your innocence?"

She made no reply. She seemed to me to be holding her breath in fear, and with nervous fingers again twisted her veil beneath her chin.

I repeated the question as softly and tenderly as I could, and at last she made response in faint words so low that I could scarcely catch them.

What she said held me aghast.

I released her, and halting, stood staring at her averted face; utterly stupefied; while next instant a pall of grief fell upon my heart. The blow stunned me. My tongue refused to articulate. In that instant the sun of my life became suddenly extinguished. The hard, bitter truth that she was guilty—guilty—while I, with my foolish, ill-placed confidence had believed her to be innocent, destroyed my love like wax before the flame. The iron of despair entered my very soul.

"Is there no means of escape—of proving

your innocence?" I asked her, when I at last found tongue.

She shook her head.

Presently, after a long and painful silence, she turned to me with quickly-beating heart, and said, in a low, nervous voice:

"I had believed, George, that we should never meet again. I prayed that fate would keep us apart in future, because I knew too well the bitterness and tragedy of our meeting, and I had hoped that you would still remember me as you told me once at Radstone—as your friend of youthful days."

"As the woman I loved," I declared quickly, taking her hand and holding it tenderly in mine.

But she withdrew it, saying:

"No, George; do not let us talk of that. I know well that you loved me, and I—God knows!" she cried, bursting suddenly into tears, "I—I love you! I still love you! But I have been betrayed. The truth must now be exposed, and I am defenceless."

Her confession of love held me silent in indecision. All the doubts I had had regarding her feelings towards Walter Guilford were now set at rest. She loved me, and yet with that bitter irony of fate that enters

so often into our lives, our future affection was forbidden.

The end had come—the cruel and bitter end. Behind us the police were lurking, ready to arrest her.

“Paolina, be frank with me,” I said. “Was May your enemy?”

“Ah, no!” she cried, covering her face with her hands. “No, no. Do not mention her!” she implored. “Let us part—let me face my punishment without your upbraiding. I can bear no word of it from your lips—from the lips of the man whom I have loved through all these years.” Then she added in a strained, uncertain voice: “Kiss me, George, if—if you will. Kiss me once in farewell—as you used to do in those days gone by—those happy days,” she faltered in emotion; “those days that will never come to us again!” And she raised her veil, and I saw a white, upturned face, with dark eyes fixed upon mine with a fierce and piteous passion.

I bent, and there, in the gloom, our lips met in a long, tender caress. Tears stood in my own eyes, as well as in hers. The tragedy of our lives was complete. I pressed her to my heart and whispered into her ear:

"Paolina! Paolina! I love you, even though you are what you are. I must, and will save you."

"You cannot," she responded blankly.

"You must not go back to-night," I said.

"You must escape, just as you are. Here is money," and I pressed my pocket-book into her hand. "In it you will find three thousand lire—enough for the present. Fly, hide yourself, and then write to me. Zoli is here—but he shall not arrest you. Go—straight on, through those trees yonder, and out into the country. But remain in Italy, as it will be unsafe for you to try and pass the frontier."

"But——"

"There are no buts. You shall not remain and court arrest. Zoli believes you are guilty of the murder of Fred Ingram in Florence, but of that I know you are innocent."

"Ah, yes!" she cried. "I am innocent, as I have always told you, but how can it be proved?"

"I can prove it," I answered. Then, at risk of breaking faith with Fred, I told her that he still lived.

"I know that!" she said in a quieter

tone. "I met him face to face in Regent Street. At first I could not believe my eyes, but subsequently I established the truth that it was really he—the man whose testimony will condemn me. But ask me no more. If you really think that I can escape, then I will try. And if I succeed, you will forget all that I have told you to-night, George," she implored. "Remember me only as—as Paolina, the luckless, unhappy woman who loved you better than her own life." And, raising her cold, pale face to mine again, she kissed me upon the lips, whispering in that soft, sweet voice of long, long ago: "Farewell—farewell, my love. *Addio—addio!*"

Next moment she had left my side, and almost before I became aware of it she had plunged into the darkness, and was lost to me in the small wood that lay between us and the open country and the Apennines.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SHADOWS MY LOVE.

EVENTS moved quickly.

Of how Zoli met me in the Via Cavour half an hour afterwards boiling with rage and full of reproaches, or of my hasty departure from Siena, I need not tell you. Nor need I describe the long, anxious days I passed at the old-fashioned Hotel Bonne Femme, in Turin, watching the papers and fearing lest my guilty love might be traced and arrested.

Yet as the days lengthened into weeks, and no notice appeared of her capture, I began to congratulate myself that she had again managed to slip through Zoli's fingers. He had, I knew, set to work all the marvellous machinery of the Department of Public Security, that system of espionage by which any person arriving by train at every station over the whole of Italy is watched, and

every resident or visitor is registered. But as the *festas* of Natale and the New Year passed, and the month of January became well advanced towards Carnival, it was plain that he had met with no success. In Piedmont the great plains lay beneath the icy grasp, for in the vicinity of the Alps the winter is often severe. The sky was cloudless, the air was clear and frosty, and the wide, handsome streets of Turin were bright and pleasant, with a slight sprinkling of snow which caused everything to sparkle like an old-fashioned Christmas-card.

I had been idling there a month, undecided whether to return to England, and devoting myself each evening to scanning all the papers in the Café San Carlo, for there I found all the journals from Florence, Genoa, and Rome, and read them with avidity. My first impulse was to go to my own place in Florence; but somehow recollections of the past crowded upon me, and prevented me from returning to the scene of my lost happiness, and therefore I had gone to the brightness and gaiety of the Piedmont capital, to watch and to wait.

One night, having sat among the chattering crowd listening to the café concert, and

having exhausted the newspapers, I drained my coffee and liqueur, got into my overcoat, and started to walk back to the hotel. The night was very cold, but the moon shone with that clear, brilliant whiteness that it never possesses in Northern Europe. Suddenly, as I was passing briskly in the shadow beneath the long colonnade in the Corso Vittorio, I started at hearing my name uttered. I turned, and, to my amazement, found Paolina at my elbow.

In a few breathless sentences she explained that from old Giovannino at the Villa she had discovered that I was in Turin, and had therefore sought and found me. She was still safe, although inquiries were being made everywhere. I glanced at her, and saw that she wore a close-fitting felt toque and veil, a long, heavy jacket trimmed with some dark fur, and carried a muff in her hand.

"Since that night when we parted I have been living in Pistoja," she explained as we walked slowly along together. "Ah! those two days I spent alone on the mountains I shall never forget. I should certainly have died of exhaustion and hunger had not an old *contadina* taken me to her hut, and given

me shelter and food for three days, until I was strong enough to tramp on down to Arezzo and take the train through Florence to Pistoja, where Margherita, who was once my maid, is married to a baker. She and her husband allowed me to stay with them. and I have remained in hiding there ever since. But I felt that I must see you ; therefore yesterday I came here, and not daring to call at your hotel, lest Zoli should have set watch upon it, I waited to meet you in secret like this."

"It is a great risk, Paolina, for you to come to a city like Turin," I said quickly, anxious. "The police are always watchful at the station, you know."

"The danger I was compelled to face. Had I written to you asking you to come to Pistoja, my letter might have fallen into other hands, and revealed my whereabouts. Therefore I determined to risk it in order to ask you to do something for me—one last favour."

"Do something for you?" I echoed, looking at her white face. "Why, of course. Only tell me, and I will serve you in any way in my power."

We had turned from the main Corso,

where many people were passing and chattering beneath the colonnades, into a long, deserted side street, which led down to the Piazza Cavour.

Instinctively I had taken her arm, and I felt her breath coming and going quickly in deep emotion at again meeting me. How strange and eventful was her career! What a lifetime of anxiety and suspense she had lived through ever since the day of that mysterious discovery in Florence!

"You recollect, George, what I—what I told you in Siena?" she said presently, in a low, faltering voice, with a slight pressure on my arm. "You asked me a question regarding—regarding the affair at Radstone, and I told you."

"Yes," I said swallowing a lump that rose in my throat; "but why refer to it?"

"Because I want you to help me," was her answer, her nervous fingers twisting her veil, a habit of hers when apprehensive. "Since you met me that night and I fled from Zoli, I have made a discovery. I have found out something of which I was then in ignorance, and I want you to go to England and see the Signor Ingram on my behalf.

I would go myself, only, as you know, I dare not. But you can go if you will ; you can see him, and ask him to either tell you the truth of the affair in Florence, or to come here to Italy and see me."

"Paolina," I said, stopping and regarding her very seriously, "I have already implored him to tell me, but he stoutly refuses. He will not meet you because, for some reason known only to himself, he fears that which you could reveal may bring upon him a shame which he dare not face."

"I know—I know!" she cried quickly, clinging to me and looking up into my countenance. "He fears, of course, that because I am Italian I may be vindictive. But assure him that he need fear nothing. Tell him that unless he gives me permission, I will never reveal a word of his secret—that, though we have never been lovers, only friends, Paolina Demaria still remains loyal to him."

I hesitated, for I saw the utter futility of such a mission. Fred held her in both fear and suspicion. No persuasion of mine could be availing. And I told her so.

"For my sake, George, will you help me?" she implored in desperation. "Remember you loved me once—but—but you misjudged me."

"Ah! forgive me, dearest," I cried quickly. "Yes, alas, I did misjudge you. I believed you guilty of a crime—of Fred's death. A man upon his death-bed made a lying allegation against you."

"Then why still misjudge me?" she asked calmly, in a voice of reproach.

"I still love you, Paolina," I said, as quietly as I could, my heart filled to overflowing and yet torn by conflicting emotions. "The past is of the past. I am not your judge; only your—your lover, heartbroken and desolate."

I saw that tears falling from her eyes stood in sparkling drops upon her black veil.

"And am I not desolate? Am I, too, not heartbroken?" she cried hoarsely. "I have, I know, lost you, my love, for ever. I risked all, and lost. And why? Ah! the reason you will never know—never."

"Why may I not know?" I asked in a soft, persuasive voice. "Recollect, Paolina,

you are to me still my Paolina, my love of long ago—my love to-night. Be frank," I urged, looking into her pale, serious face. "Be frank, and tell me."

"When your friend Ingram reveals the truth—when he proves one fact that is still unproved, then, perhaps, you may know," she answered in hesitation. "Therefore, if you would save me, go and seek him at once."

"Save you!" I gasped. "Can any words of his save you?"

"They can," was her low answer, her breast heaving and falling slowly beneath her heavy furs.

"Then he *shall* speak," I cried in desperation. "I will compel him to speak, or he shall come here and see you. What do you wish to know?"

"Many things. Ask him to come to Italy and see me in secret."

"And if he refuses?"

"If he refuses," she said in a changed voice, the voice of a desperate woman, "then give him this, and tell him that Paolina Demaria, instead of bringing shame and dishonour upon him, as he fears, shows by her gift her readiness to clear him if he

will but come to her and speak the truth." And, placing her hand within the breast of her jacket, she drew forth a large, blue, linen-lined envelope, with big red seals upon it.

The superscription was in her well-known angular hand: "To the Signor Alfredo Ingram."

At midnight three days later I was standing with Fred in the frowsy sitting-room of a cheap "professional" lodging in a narrow street leading off St. Mary's Street, in Cardiff. He had just returned from the theatre, and, to his surprise, found me awaiting him.

In a few brief sentences I explained how I had travelled home post-haste from Turin, having at last re-discovered Paolina.

His thin, careworn face fell as I uttered her name. I told him how Zoli was still in search of her, and of her imminent peril of arrest, and I explained what she had said—that he could save her. But he shrugged his shoulders, and a bitter smile played about his clean-shaven mouth.

I asked him to go out to Italy with me, and I implored him to act in obedience with my love's wish; but he shook his head,

and remained obdurate. I related to him how she had managed to slip through Zoli's fingers in Siena ; how she was now living in secret with Margherita, in that quiet old city at the foot of the Apennines ; and how she had faced the danger of arrest in order to speak with me.

He heard me, but said little. He seemed, indeed, to regard me as a fool for my pains.

At last, finding him unconvinced of her goodwill, and therefore unwilling to stir a hand to save her, I took the envelope from my pocket, and, handing it to him, said :

"She sends you this, with a message imploring you not to delay going out to see her. She would come here herself if it were not that she fears arrest."

He took the envelope, and with trembling fingers broke the seals ; then eagerly peered inside. The next second, having apparently recognised the contents, he stood staring at me, open-mouthed, in sheer bewilderment.

"You will excuse me, old fellow, if I go and examine this alone," he said a moment later, in a voice full of emotion, and he

passed through the folding doors to the bedroom beyond.

In the silence, broken only by the ticking of the cheap American clock, I heard the quick rustling of crisp paper and an exclamation of surprise and a sigh of satisfaction. Then, when he returned to me a few moments later with the envelope in his left hand, his face had changed. He laid his right hand upon my shoulder, saying, in a deep, serious voice :

"George, I have wronged her, and I have wronged you, old fellow. Forgive me."

"On condition that you obey her and come out to Italy with me."

"I will," he said. "I cannot refuse. She has given me back this. Ah! you don't know!" he cried, his eyes full of a strange light. "You don't know what this means to me. See!" he said, walking straight to the fire and placing the envelope with its contents carefully in the centre of the flames. "It means that my secret is kept!" he cried, in a voice something like his old buoyant self. "It means that I have no further fear of shame—that I can again hold up my head before my fellow-men."

"Then you will set out for Italy with me to-morrow," I urged. "Every hour is of importance. She may be arrested at any moment, for Zoli's spies are everywhere."

"Yes," he said, "I will go to her. There is a mystery—a great and inscrutable mystery."

"A mystery of which it seems that you yourself hold the key," I said.

"Well," he answered, "we shall see. At present the whole affair is to me an enigma which admits of no solution. We must wait until she tells us all she knows."

"In three days we can be in Pistoja," I said, "and then, if you will but answer her question, she will tell us all she knows. She has promised me."

Surely, I need not describe how next morning Fred resigned his engagement with the company and paid a fine; how we took the express to London, and left Charing Cross the same night for Italy by way of Paris and Modena; or how, on arrival in quaint old Pistoja, that quiet, ancient town of palaces, we discovered to our chagrin that she had fled to San Martino, the little village twenty miles away across the Arno

valley, where she and her father had lived in the old, well-remembered days, the tiny place that nestled beneath the great old castle-like villa that was my home.

In her desperation she had gone back to those rural scenes of youthful happiness, and from Margherita we learnt that she was living in secret with Pierrina, a carpenter's wife, who had been formerly a housemaid in the old professor's service.

The sun had sunk behind the snow-capped mountain crests, and the *or di notte* had just tolled from the tall, square castellated tower of the thousand-year-old church as our rickety carriage ascended from the plain through the olive groves and vineyards, and gained the tiny piazza of San Martino. The gossiping peasants, recognising me, gave me a hearty greeting as we continued to climb the hill towards the Villa, which stood boldly on the crest, overlooking the surrounding country.

From one of the houses as we passed there emerged the white-haired old *proposto*, Padre Giuseppe, in his *cotta* and purple stole, preceded by an acolyte, while around the door some peasants were talking and gesticulating excitedly. The village priest

had, I saw, been to administer the *olio santo* to some dying person within.

Father Giuseppe gravely raised his biretta in salutation as he passed back to his own bare dwelling adjoining the church, while at the same moment my faithful old Giovannino rushed out of the crowd to stop me.

"Ah! Signore! Signor Padrone!" the old fellow cried. "The poor signorina! The brute has killed her—she is dying!"

"What signorina?" I gasped. "Whom do you mean?"

"The Signorina Paolina!" he gasped. "She returned here yesterday, and last night, while walking down to the Lastra, some cowardly scoundrel rushed at her, struck her with his knife, and then escaped. The Signor Proposto has just administered the *olio santo*. Poor signorina! The doctor has said she cannot possibly live."

Without a word I dashed up the common stairway to the second floor, where in a small room into which struggled the last rays of the yellow wintry afterglow, there lay upon a low, cheap, iron bedstead my dear one, with blanched, expressionless countenance, her dark hair dishevelled across

the pillow, her lips half parted, her eyes closed, motionless, as though soul and body had already departed.

A sister in black habit from the Convent sat at her side, crucifix in hand, together with the woman who had served the old professor so faithfully through so many years.

The latter recognised me as I entered.

I bent and kissed the cold lips, and then, in a paroxysm of wild despair, threw myself upon my knee beside her, and covered the thin white hand with kisses, while Fred stood back in the shadow with head uncovered, silent and motionless.

My love was dying! The doctor had no hope, the last rites of the church had been administered, and the silent watchers were powerless, waiting only for the departure of the soul.

Suddenly, as I knelt by her, she slowly opened her great dark eyes, fixed them upon me, and sighed. And then, seeing a slight sweet smile of recognition upon her white lips, I bent and kissed her softly and tenderly.

"George!" she whispered, in a voice so low that I could scarcely catch it.

And again she sighed, and once more closed her eyes as though in sleep, and lay motionless as carven stone.

Was she dead? I stood staring at her, watching eagerly for some further sign. But, alas, there was none—none!

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CHAPTER XXIV.

CLEAR UP THE MYSTERY.

CARNIVAL was over.

It was the end of February, a warm, cloudless day of the Tuscan spring, although the snow still shone upon the distant peaks across the valley behind Pistoja.

On the long terrace before the old Villa, stretched in a low, wicker chair in the sunshine, lay the pale, wan figure of my love, her hand in mine, her beautiful face turned to the gay City of the Lily that lay far below upon the plain, with the Arno winding away like a silver thread into the distant haze.

Between life and death she had hovered for a whole month, for in the darkness she had been struck by that most terrible of weapons—a thin, triangular-bladed stiletto, known in Italy as a *misericordia*, the wound

from which is almost inevitably fatal. Thanks, however, to the skill of the two professors from Florence, she was now in such a fair way to complete recovery that we had been enabled to move her up to the Villa to larger and more airy quarters, in the care of old Sandrina.

As I sat beside her, bending over and talking, with her thin little hand in mine, footsteps sounded behind us, and, turning, I saw Fred and Bob Alderson approaching with Pietro Zoli.

The man who had so persistently hunted down the invalid advanced to her, bent, and greeted her quietly and sympathetically, whereupon Fred explained to me :

"We've brought the Signor Zoli here at Paolina's request. It is only right that he, like yourself, should now be made aware of the whole truth. Our friend Zoli is just as astounded to find me alive and well as you were ; but since Paolina has been able to chat with me she has revealed certain facts which, combined with what I myself and Bob Alderson know, make the whole affair quite plain. Paolina and I have been perfectly frank with each other, old fellow," he added. "We have told each other every-

thing, and thus discovered a truth that is absolutely amazing."

"Tell me," I urged anxiously, still holding my love's thin hand. "Tell me everything, Fred." What charges they intended to make against her I feared to anticipate. Yet she was, nevertheless, mine—mine in spite of everything they might allege.

"Well," he exclaimed, "I suppose I had better tell you of the facts as I know them, and after I have spoken Paolina will reveal the truth to you. As far as it concerns myself the affair commenced at the Hotel National, in Lucerne, where I met a Frenchman, the Vicomte Vernet, of Lyons, who posed as a member of the old nobility, but who was really leader of a gang of very clever sharpers, known among themselves as 'The Spiders,' who frequented the Swiss hotels and preyed upon unsuspecting English tourists. One day, while he was in my private sitting-room smoking, I went along the corridor to my bedroom, inadvertently leaving the keys in my despatch-box. During my absence he must have opened it and examined its contents, finding, among other things, a quantity of negotiable securities. His first impulse, probably, was

to steal them then and there ; but, fearing detection, he simply took an impression of the latch-key of my flat in Florence, which hung upon the bunch—using the wax that he always carried for such purposes—and resolved to await his time. He most probably also tried to take an impression of the key of the despatch-box, but my sudden return prevented this. I had mentioned my intention of returning to Florence in a couple of days ; therefore the fellow must have informed his accomplices, a Frenchman named Martin and an Italian named Valio, both expert thieves, and it was arranged to follow me in secret, enter my flat in the Piazza Vittorio, steal the contents of the box, and place the guilt upon Paolina, whom they knew to be a friend of mine. The plot was most ingeniously conceived, but an unexpected surprise was in store for them.” And he paused, as though at a loss how to explain intelligibly the intricate circumstances.

“ Well,” he went on, sighing, with a grave shadow suddenly upon his refined face, “ they ascended to the flat soon after I had left for Venice, and they watched my servant out. With their false key Vernet and Martin entered in the darkness, while

Valio watched outside, and on lighting a candle discovered to their horror a man lying dead upon the floor of the study, murdered. Even this, however, did not deter them from their design, for they took the box from its place on the side table, and with cutters managed to open the top and abstract all the securities and documents secreted in the cavity of the lid. Then they succeeded by threats in inducing Ignazio Perelli, an associate of theirs, to go to Paolina's house during her absence, and there secrete certain objects and useless documents in her room. It was a dastardly revenge upon her."

"Yes," exclaimed my love, turning to me and speaking in Italian, "two hours later I returned, and thinking it strange that Ignazio should have waited there for me, I afterwards discovered some puzzling documents—a knife and other objects, that had clearly been placed there with a purpose. In an instant I saw that I was the victim of some plot, and suspected Vernet, who a year before had attempted to steal my jewellery at the 'Métropole' in Milan, and whom I had denounced as a thief. I knew that he intended to have revenge upon me.

Before he tried to get my jewellery, he had made me an offer of marriage; and I had refused. Therefore I burnt all the documents save the two which I kept and lately returned to the Signor Ingram; and when next morning I heard of the tragedy—that my friend the Signor Ingram had been killed—I saw that suspicion had been purposely placed upon me, and fled. I longed to see you, George, to prove my innocence, but it was, I saw, impossible. You would not believe me. I knew that Vernet would denounce me, for on that night in question I had ascended to the dead man's apartment, but could make no one hear."

"He did, the liar—before he died," Zoli remarked. "When I found that evidence in your rooms—the burnt paper, the knife, the cutter with which the despatch-box had been opened, was it surprising that I should believe him?"

"Certainly not," Ingram remarked.

"But who was the man who fell a victim in your place?" I asked eagerly.

"Listen, and I will tell you," he said with a sudden catch in his voice. "But I hope that neither of you will ever betray my confidence. It is a matter which affects

our family honour. Do you remember about a year before meeting a man who was staying with me named Elkin Tew? I recollect that one night you dined with us."

"I remember him perfectly," I replied.

"Well," he went on, in a hard tone, "that man was really my brother Henry, who was about three years younger than myself, but who was, unfortunately, dismissed from the Navy in disgrace, and degenerated into living upon his wits in Paris under the name of Tew. After leaving the Navy, he had so completely lost all sense of honour as an Englishman that he had actually prepared plans of the submarine mine-fields of the estuaries of the Tyne and the Humber, with the object of selling them to a foreign Power. I knew he was penniless, and suspected this dastardly intention; therefore, in order to save his traitorous action, I bought them from him, and kept them in my despatch-box, together with some coupons and other securities.

"A couple of years went by, and Harry, again in great straits for money, and finding that I refused to help him further, apparently resolved to enter my flat in Florence—of which he had often had the key when stay-

ing with me—again obtain possession of the plans he had sold to me, and dispose of them to a German attaché in Paris, with whom he was in negotiation. I have now discovered that he came to Florence in secret, and learning that I had left for Venice and that the place was unattended, he went there about four o'clock in the afternoon, intending to obtain the box.

"It so happened that my servant, a man who had only been with me a fortnight, was not absent, but most probably idling over a newspaper, when he heard someone moving in the study. My servant crept in and faced the intruder, to find in my brother the man with whom his young wife had fled to Paris a year before—the man who was his bitterest enemy. My brother saw that he was entrapped. High words arose. The fellow struck Harry, who in return struck him back, whereupon the assassin drew his knife and stabbed him."

"Then the dead man was really your brother!" I gasp bewildered at his startling story.

"Yes; but let me conclude," he said. "Almost at the same moment the electric door-bell rang, and the assassin, compelled

to act boldly and answer it, found, to his surprise, that it was a young English lady. She inquired for me, but on being told I was absent, left her mother's card. It was May Wentworth. The fellow, left alone with his victim, suddenly realised that this young Englishwoman could give sufficient circumstantial evidence against him to convict him; therefore, taking whatever objects of value he could lay his hand upon, he slipped down the stairs and escaped, the body remaining where it had fallen until discovered four hours later by Vernet and Martin."

He paused for a moment, looking straight at me.

"And now you will see, old fellow," he continued, "why, when I read of the tragedy in the papers, I feared to reveal myself as still living. Those important naval plans, so evidently the work of a spy, had been found among my effects, and they condemned me as a traitor. It was that which I could not bring myself to face. At the time I was unaware that it was Harry who had fallen a victim, yet by the fact of Paolina's flight, of certain things being found in her rooms, and of certain documents having been burnt there, I felt confident that she

would keep those plans, and that, if I dared to show myself, the shame of the traitor would certainly fall upon me. Therefore I concealed my identity, and allowed the world to regard me as dead. Not until a week ago, when Paolina told me all she had discovered, was I able to prove that the man who had been buried as myself was actually my brother. Of the identity of the assassin, too, I was unaware, until Paolina gave me the missing proof."

"George," she said, pressing my hand when my old friend had finished, and looking up fondly into my eyes, "let me tell you the truth, now that the Signor Ingram is no longer in fear of me," and she smiled across at him.

"Fear of you!" he cried. "By sending me those stolen plans you gave me back my honour—my very life!"

"Well," she explained, "it was like this. I first became acquainted with Ignazio Perelli when he became engaged to one of my domestics. Afterwards, however, when I discovered him to be a friend of Vernet's, I forbade him the house, and was therefore suspicious when on that fatal night I returned and heard that he had waited for me until

his patience had become exhausted. From the day I fled from Italy to America, the hunted victim of my enemies who had so cleverly contrived to enmesh me and cast upon me the stigma of a dastardly crime, I never saw him until that afternoon on the high road outside Bedford, when the motor broke down. I was surprised to meet him with Domenico Valio, dragging a piano-organ. Four years had made a great difference to both of them, for the 'Spiders' having broken up after the death of their leader, they had evidently fallen upon evil times. I believed Valio had come to England from motives of revenge, and lived in daily fear of them. A fortnight later, however, while walking alone on the road to Culworth, I met them again. I was about to pass them, hoping they would not recognise me, when both suddenly came forward, expressed their regret at having placed those evidences of the crime in my room, and revealed to me the startling fact that I was in peril of my life from another quarter. Why or how, they refused to explain. Valio revealed to me, however, how Martin and Vernet had found a man whom they believed to be the Signor Ingram dead in the room, and then,

for the first time, I was aware that Vernet was not the assassin. Both men declared their readiness to act as my friends.

"I had recognised the Signor Ingram while passing up Regent Street. I knew he was not dead as everyone believed, and each day I became more and more mystified and apprehensive. I feared that if you and he met he would tell you of my acquaintance with the man Vernet, of whose true character I was at the time unaware, and that you would believe me to have been an accomplice. Therefore, I took your friend, the Signor Alderson, partly into my confidence. We exchanged letters in secret, and he generously assured me of his desire to assist me. With that object he discovered the Signor Ingram, and quickly established his real identity.

"One morning, while out cycling, I saw a man—a stranger whom I recognised at once as an Italian—seated at the tap-room window of the 'Lion,' a small beer-house in King's Sutton, and on that same afternoon Valio and Perelli, in order to slip a message into my hand, came with their organ to the Grange. They did so, and whispered to me an appointment to meet

them that night at the Croughton cross-roads ; and in consequence I sent a telegram to the Signor Alderson, in London, to come down and be present at the spot, for I did not altogether trust them. At one o'clock in the morning I escaped by the window of the kitchen and kept the tryst. The two musicians told us that the stranger whom I had seen in King's Sutton had come from Italy, and meant mischief ; so we resolved to inform the police in the morning. On re-entering the Grange at three o'clock I noticed, in creeping along the corridor, that the door of May's room was star ; and, peering in, distinguished, to my horror, by the night-light which she always burnt, that a crime had been committed in my presence. Whoever had done it had probably been concealed in the house when it was locked up, and had tampered with the lock of the bedroom door before May retired, otherwise she would certainly have locked it.

" I know I acted very unwisely, but in the horror of the moment I knew not what I did. Without arousing the household, I slipped out of my own window, in preference to again descending the creaking stairs, crossed the roof, and sped away back to the

cross-roads and out on the highway, which I believed Signor Alderson had taken. I failed, however, to overtake him. Therefore I waited at Banbury until the early train, and followed him up to London. Not until I met him did I recognise the grave suspicion I had cast upon myself by flight. There was then but one way to clear myself—that was, to overtake the assassin. As I dearly wished to break my engagement with Walter, the idea of flight at first commended itself to me, but I quickly saw how very unwisely I had acted in allowing the police to believe me guilty. I had placed myself in such a position that the whole weight of circumstantial evidence was against me. Even you, George, would, I knew, believe me jealous of May, convinced as you were that I loved your friend Ingram. So I escaped to Brussels, and there Perelli and the Signor Alderson followed me, and the former, for the first time, revealed to me the astounding truth. And yet I was powerless, fearing to speak, lest the Signor Ingram should still place upon me the responsibility of his brother's death. In Brussels one night, in an upstairs room not far from the Leopold Station, I met face to face the assassin—

the man who struck down Henry Ingram, and who afterwards sought out and killed poor little May because she was the one witness of his crime. She had met him accidentally in London, we believe, and had recognised him as the man who had answered the door when she had called upon her dead lover. It was in order to silence her that he killed her.

"I faced him and denounced him, but suddenly he flew at me like some wild animal, and defied me. He threatened to reveal to you, George, things which were base calumnies, vile untruths; and I feared him. Again I found myself helpless and hunted by the police for a crime of which I was unable to satisfactorily prove myself innocent; therefore I was compelled to fly south to Siena, and accept the hospitality of Ignazio's mother, while he and the Signor Alderson attempted to collect sufficient evidence to convict the real culprit of the double crime of which he was certainly guilty."

"And who is the man?" I asked her quickly.

"The same who came forth from the shadow as I walked down yonder, and

struck me the cowardly, revengeful blow that he intended should also close my lips."

"The man who was my servant," Fred remarked, as quietly as he could. "I think you met him, you said, in Brussels—Enrico Gallotti."

"Gallotti!" I cried. "Why, he told me in Brussels that he had never been to England."

"Yes," Zoli said; "the man who, on being arrested in Bologna yesterday, resisted the guards, drew a knife, and fought with such fiendish desperation that the brigadier was compelled to draw his revolver in self-defence and shoot him like a dog. He fell dead. I received a full report of the affair a few hours ago."

"Then the truth regarding your brother's traitorous action need never be known," remarked Bob Alderson to Fred, after a long silence that fell between us.

"Or," I said, turning and kissing my love's sweet face, "or that, dear heart, I have ever for one moment doubted your innocence."

And she, in return, fixed her dark eyes upon mine with a look of peace and thank-

fulness more expressive than any words of hers could have been.

She was mine, still mine, after all those years of storm and strife and dark suspicion ; and, by God's grace, mine for evermore.

CHAPTER XXV.

CONCLUSION.

THE present? For us, the long summer days of life are full of perfect love and sweet content, just as they were in the old, well-remembered time far back, when I was a raw youth and she the hoydenish daughter of the old professor. And even now that she is my wife—the Signora Padrona, as the peasants are proud to call her—and we live together in the great old Villa, we often, at evening, ramble down through the vineyards and the olive groves, where first I whispered to her my fond passion, where first her red lips pressed mine in that ecstatic new-found happiness of youth.

No mere words of mine can convey to you what we both feel, united as we are with the blessing of God and of kind Father Giuseppe upon us.

Of the others little need be told, for this

crooked chronicle mainly concerns our own adventurous lives. Bob Alderson is still an irresponsible bachelor, and one of the best fellows alive. The old Earl of Towcester is dead, and Walter, having succeeded, is to marry a pretty but, I fear, rather brainless young *débutante* of last season—a marriage of convenience, pure and simple, the union of two great houses. I wonder at him, but great riches often render a good man's actions unaccountable. Fred Ingram, however, has been far wiser and happier in his choice, for, on revealing his existence, his brother generously gave him back his inheritance, and six months ago he married Dora Hallett, half Bournemouth being at the wedding. They went out to India for their honeymoon, and have only recently returned to settle in the fine villa Fred has bought in the Viale dei Colli, the prettiest part of Florence. Martin is now serving ten years in Elba for fraud; but Ignazio, to whom the revelation of the truth was in such great measure due, is now in my service as under-bailiff on the estate, and is devoted to both my wife and myself; while Pietro Zoli, whenever he can find time to spend a few hours in the country, comes

up for a smoke and a chat. He has taken Domenico Valio into the police service as a secret agent.

For a long time that strange message from Rome which prevented him arresting Paolina in Chicago was to us all a mystery, and was only recently cleared up by my friend the Marquis Orsini, the eminent ex-Minister of the Interior and Senator. It appears that, having known Fred Ingram well at the Florence Club, he was amazed to encounter him alive and well one night on the main line platform at Paddington. He made secret inquiries, and, finding that he was not dead, as the world believed, he had an official order telegraphed to Zoli in America cancelling the request for extradition, and then set to work himself to try and solve the mystery of the living Englishman. But in this, he admitted, he was entirely unsuccessful, and very soon gave up the problem as one beyond solution. It was only when we all three met one day at the club that we revealed to him the truth.

Beyond this, there remains nothing to relate. I have written down for you the circumstances just as they occurred, because

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"NOW I HAVE BUT TO WRITE 'THE END.'"

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I believe they form as strange a history as any man has lived to tell.

And now I have but to write "The End," in the earnest hope that your love will be as perfect as my own.

In the shady rose-arbour on the old lichen-covered terrace, where the little green lizards dart over the sun-baked stones as I pen these final lines of the adventures of two hearts that were one, my well-beloved, standing beside me all in white, has smiled sweetly to herself at sight of my reference to our mutual happiness.

She is thinking deeply. Her beautiful face, that is so admired when we drive together in the Cascine, is turned away up that verdant valley to where the time-mellowed domes and high towers of old Florence rise from the shining river. The black shadows have rolled away, and are succeeded by the cloudless dawn of life and love.

My sweet-faced wife, so supremely happy, is, I think, reflecting upon the bitter might-have-beens, her dark eyes fixed thoughtfully upon that incomparable centre of all the arts where our love was lost and yet has been so happily found again—that wonderful,

unchanging city, whose old brown walls form the calyx containing the fairest flowers of the human mind—that city of sunshine, laughter, and flowers, that we both love so well—the City of Lilies.

THE END.

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on, E.C